THE *MYTH* OF DISABILITY

THE *MYTH* OF DISABILITY:

DISABILITY THEORY AND HERMAN MELVILLE'S *MOBY-DICK*

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ABSTRACT

Conventional literary representations of disability reflect and re-inscribe the fraudulent assumption that individuals with impairments are mysterious 'others,' subhuman betrayers of the divinely-sanctioned corporeal norm. When such normative 'myths' are internalized by a social body, the culturally-determined 'disabled' minority is subjected to various forms of oppression and degradation, stigmatizing efforts designed to strip the 'deviants' of agency and dignity. The object of this study is to isolate and, subsequently, *demythologize* the presuppositions ordering such conventional disability myths. This 'demythologizing' effort is patterned, in large part, on the theoretical tenets espoused by Roland Barthes in his influential text *Mythologies*. Barthes's text, in its emphasis on destabilizing culturally-fixed 'truths,' provides the theoretical framework necessary for gauging the socio-political load of disability myth. In an effort to illumine, moreover, the presence and workings of disability myth in nineteenth and twentieth century Western consciousness, I examine the specific portraits of disability that appear in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*; Melville's canonized text lends itself particularly well to this type of investigation as its characters – Ahab and Pip, in particular – are representative of the spectrum of negative disability imagery. This critical exercise, in its emphasis on displacing and, thus, de-*naturalizing* mythic representations of 'normal' and 'abnormal' corporeality, resembles and reinforces the efforts of the *Disability Movement* and its attempts to restore power and dignity to the unjustly disenfranchised 'disabled' minority.

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INTRODUCTION

In Search of 'Disability'

In his article "Allies, Advocates and Obstacles," disability activist Tom Shakespeare outlines the principal challenge facing proponents of the *Disability Rights* movement:

> Our real enemy is not individuals, but the *system* which divides us, which *creates* our disability, which makes it possible for others to profit from our exclusion: it's convenient and easy to highlight people, but the focus of our rage and our action should be the *structures*. (32 my emphasis)

Shakespeare and his contemporaries call for the systematic dismantling of any and all social 'structures' organized around the idea that physical and mental impairments necessarily restrict an individual from full and active participation in society. At the core of these 'systems' of social control is the naturalized assumption that the corporeal body can be ordered into two distinct categories: normal/able-bodied and abnormal/disabled. Implicit in this binary is the notion that disability is an inherent human flaw, a 'true' identity worn on the bodies of all who deviate from the established physical and psychological norms. The immediate consequence of such a dichotomized mode of characterization is that the 'disabled' person's individuality is eclipsed by his/her disability; he/she comes to represent, to the homogenizing 'able-bodied' elite, a mysterious and horrific 'other,' a betrayer of the established image of human perfection. The deviant bodies, in turn, are subjected to various forms of collective debasement and legalized degradation at the hands of the normalizing able-bodied majority.

Disability rights activists have, in recent years, focused their collective efforts on deprivilegizing this system of hierarchical social patterning. The primary theoretical tenet underlying their socio-political platform revolves around the idea that disability is the product of a hostile and oppressive society, and *not* of an individual's physical or mental impairments. This radical shift from an 'individual' to a 'social' model of disability resembles, both in theory and in practice, the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and its emphasis on re-ordering society within an 'equal opportunities' framework. Such a shift in perspective requires that we, the social body, suspend our conventional beliefs about disability and who we traditionally define as 'disabled'. It demands that we dispel the ideas that disability is an established 'certainty,' a free-standing Platonic *form* unencumbered by cultural impediments. Moreover, we must, as advocates of the 'social' model, denaturalize the popular medical/clinical assertion that disability is the product of a genetic defect, a corporeal flaw that can be articulated only in medical or rehabilitory terms. In short, 'disability' must be approached from an entirely new perspective; its historical and political dimensions must be unraveled to reveal that 'disability,' as we have been conditioned to understand it, is nothing but a socially constructed myth, a myth bred by particular interests and consumed by an all-too-willing social body.

This – to borrow Roland Barthes's term – 'demythologizing' effort, this attempt to disclose the 'mythic' assumptions underlying traditional definitions and conventional representations of disability, constitutes the very heart of this study. By elucidating how a culture *constructs* its definition of disability, how it *invents* and *polices* its versions of 'normal' and 'abnormal' corporeality, I hope to destabilize its naturalized status in the

social sphere. I hope to prove that disability is neither 'true' nor 'constant,' but a product of a system of cultural learning, a myth designed to legitimate and sustain the seemingly divine status quo. By engaging, moreover, in an extensive investigation of the various representations of disability found in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, I attempt to further illumine exactly how and why such myths are perpetuated in a culture.[1] This essentially 'deconstructionist' *modus operandi* facilitates what disability theorists Alan Gartner and Tom Joe describe as a "critical awareness of the roles of images of disability in shaping the lives and (limiting the) opportunities of persons with disabilities" (4).

Methodology

The thesis is divided into two chapters. The first chapter – 'The *Myth* of Disability' – focuses on isolating and, subsequently, deprivilegizing conventional definitions of disability. The chapter is largely theoretical and provides the foundation necessary for formulating a cogent analysis of the controlling forces behind and repercussions of the discriminatory representations of disability in Melville's *Moby-Dick*. In the first sub-section of this chapter, '*The History/Hegemony of the 'Individual Model' of Disability*,' I attempt a brief historical analysis of the origins of disability 'myth'. The work of disability theorists Michael Oliver and Victor Finkelstein proves invaluable for this particular critical exercise. In an effort to decipher exactly how such myths achieve and sustain a privileged status in society, a brief analysis of French theorist Roland Barthes's influential text *Mythologies* follows. Barthes submits that what a society perceives to be natural – for our purposes, the

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[1] Melville's text lends itself particularly well to this type of investigation as its characters are representative of the spectrum of negative disability imagery (i.e. *Ahab* as evil, maladjusted accident victim and *Pip* as

idea that 'disability' is an innate mark of 'otherness' – is, in actuality, a myth that has been filtered through a complex montage of opportunistic agendas and interests. Accordingly, Barthes's text, in its emphasis on demythologizing culturally-fixed 'truths,' provides an appropriate framework through which we can gauge the socio-political 'load' of disability myth as well as locate the very systems of power perpetuating its existence. This exercise leads, in turn, to an investigation of the 'social model' of disability and its essentially Barthean avowal that disability is a product of culture, a wholly contrived social entity. A brief examination of Nora Groce's study of hereditary deafness on Martha's Vineyard further validates the social model of disability and its primary assumptions. In the sub-section entitled '*(Mis)Representing Disability,*' I proceed to explore how both William Shakespeare and Graham Greene reproduce and, subsequently, legitimate disability myths for the sake of their own artifice. Included in this investigation is a discussion of the detrimental effects of such stereotypical literary representations on individuals with disabilities and society at large. The chapter concludes with a look at how Angela Carter, in her postmodern novel *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman,* demythologizes conventional disability myths and the very presuppositions they are founded upon.

In the second chapter of the thesis – 'Disability *Myth* in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*' – the focus switches from *theory* to *practice*. Throughout the chapter, I explore the specific portraits of disability that appear in Melville's *Moby-Dick* and the social and political implications accompanied with such representations. In the introductory section

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wise and sagacious 'fool').

of the chapter, I offer a brief survey of the relevant critical response to Melville's text; included in this synopsis is an investigation of the events leading to and surrounding the 'Melville Revival' of the 1920s. By way of this historical survey, I hope to introduce the idea that despite his seemingly anti-conformist inclinations – his rejection of both the static stylistic conventions of his time and the traditional literary emphasis on ordering reality 'simply' and without decoration – Melville reproduces conventional disability myths and, thus, aligns himself, to a certain degree, with the very forces he sought to oppose. Following this initial inquiry is an extensive study of Melville's depiction of Captain Ahab and of the accepted critical interpretations of '*Ahab-as-Devil*,' '*Ahab-as-Tyrant*,' and '*Ahab-as-Psychological Case-Study*'. What is emphasized in this particular section is the extent to which Melville and his critics rely on the traditional formula of 'impairment-equals-*other*' in their characterization of Ahab. In the section that follows, '*Understanding Pip*,' I embark on a similar investigation of Melville's stereotypical and stigmatizing portraits of Pip, Gabriel and Elijah. I explore how, in each of these reproductions of the traditional conception of the 'mad prophet,' Melville re-inscribes the fraudulent notion that individuals with mental disabilities possess hyper-human capabilities, powers which precipitate their transcendence beyond the realm of 'normal' humanity. Coupled with this interpretation is the assertion that Pip and, to a lesser degree, the nameless 'crippled' beggar resemble what Leonard Kriegel calls the 'Charity Cripple,' the dependent and helpless victim of circumstance 'worthy' of benevolent thoughts and actions. In this section of the chapter, I investigate how Melville, much akin to the charities he appears to pattern his methods of characterization on, exploits and demeans individuals with

disabilities. This brief look at the stigmatizing effects of what David Hevey calls the "subhuman-dependency victim image" (25) leads, in turn, to a discussion of how we, as demythologists, can begin to destabilize such injurious representations. This discussion of the prospective solutions for combating disability myths constitutes the central focus of the study's conclusion.

CHAPTER 1: THE *MYTH* OF DISABILITY

The History/Hegemony of the 'Individual Model' of Disability

To better comprehend the 'myth' of disability – its genesis, codes and defining characteristics – it is necessary to explore, in some detail, the historical and cultural elements that shape its meaning. At the heart of this discursive 'truth' is what disability theorists have dubbed the 'individual model' of disability.[2] The basic presupposition underlying this model is that disability is located squarely within the individual; it is a fixed and natural human characteristic that marks a deviation from what is considered the 'normal' corporeal body. The 1980 World Health Organization (WHO) definition of disability appropriates assumptions from the individual model into its discussions about disability and the disabled. In the WHO's estimation, disability is characterized by "any limitation (resulting from an impairment) in the ability to perform any activity considered normal for a human being or required for some recognized social role or occupation" (143). In this particular definition, disability stems from the 'functional limitations' that arise from an individual's impairment; hence, if an individual cannot perform certain duties – say, mount a public bus, dine at the restaurant of his/her choice, or read a university textbook – because of his/her impairment, that individual is considered to be disabled. What is markedly clear from this and similar definitions of disability is that the individual must either overcome his/her impairment and, thus, join the able-bodied community, or be

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[2] Although Michael Oliver claims parental rights for the creation of the 'individual' and 'social' models of disability (See Oliver's important early work *Social Work With Disabled People)* he is quick to express his

content to fade quietly (and, according to this model, deservedly) into the margins of society. In both cases, the onus is on the 'disabled' to adapt to the culture's normative standards; their abnormalities must be purged if they are to be granted unconditional access into the social arena. In his study "Theories and Values: Ethics and Contrasting Perspectives on Disability," longtime disability scholar Harlan Hahn outlines the parameters of this 'functional-limitations' paradigm:

> ...the only means of adjusting to a disability involve prevention, which suggests the futile hope that such differences might eventually be abolished; normalization, or the effort to approximate the state of the nondisabled majority; and dissociation, or the attempt to reduce the importance of disability on a person's life. (19)

The individual model of disability, as Hahn's observations suggest, relies unequivocally on a preexisting definition of normality. What its supporters fail to acknowledge, however, is that these normative standards are entirely the products of the political, social, historical and economical systems in place in a culture at any given moment in time.

In his critical text *The Politics of Disablement*, Michael Oliver submits that three historically relevant components underpin the individual model of disability or what he refers to, in this particular text, as the "personal tragedy theory of disability" (19). The first of Oliver's three theories involves his assertion that throughout history, societies grounded in and organized around religious beliefs and ideologies tended to perceive impairments as badges pinned on the 'evil' by vengeful and omnipotent deities. Susan Sontag, in her influential work *Illness as Metaphor*, lends support to Oliver's claims: "With the advent of Christianity, which imposed more moralized notions of disease, as of everything else, a

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indebtedness to both Victor Finkelstein and the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation

closer fit between disease and 'victim' evolved. The idea of disease as punishment yielded the idea that a disease could be a particularly appropriate and just punishment" (43). In the Old Testament, for instance, physical and mental impairments – blindness, 'lameness' and schizophrenia, to name a few – were interpreted as signs of divine punishment, celestial forms of retribution for an individual's previous sins. In the New Testament, impairments, specifically epilepsy, indicated that an individual was possessed by the devil.

The second historical process Oliver associates with the rise of the individual model of disability pertains to the cultural theory of *liminality*. In societies where disability was never fully articulated or defined – where neither religious nor medical ideologies claimed to be the anointed purveyors of conventional wisdom – individuals with impairments existed in a purgatory social reality wherein flight or escape were equally impossible. Oliver describes this transitory state as follows:

> ...the long-term physically impaired [are seen as] neither sick nor well, neither dead nor fully alive, neither out of society nor wholly in it. They are human beings but their bodies are warped or malfunctioning, leaving their full humanity in doubt. The disabled spend a lifetime in a...suspended state. They are neither fish nor fowl; they exist in partial isolation from society as undefined, ambiguous people. (21)

The 'Freak Show,' an American treasure that enjoyed enormous economic success from the years 1840 to 1940 (Bogdan 23), unabashedly profited from this traditional idea that physical and mental impairments were the natural marks of the 'other,' the emblems of the sub-human. Throughout the nineteenth century, P.T. Barnum, the prime player in the manufacturing of 'human oddities' for public entertainment, capitalized on the American hunger for the exotic by displaying so-called 'anomalous' bodies in his traveling freak

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(UPIAS) for their insights into the Disability question.

shows. In most instances, the biographical backgrounds of these 'ambiguous' personages were misrepresented to render the individual more mysterious and, thus, appealing to the curious onlooker. Robert Bogdan, in his study "The Social Construction of Freaks," outlines the Freak Show's use of this exoticized mode of presentation:

> In the most flagrant distortion under the exotic mode, Americans [*sic*] citizens were misrepresented as non-Western foreigners – Ohio raised dwarfs were said to be from Borneo, a tall North Carolinian black from Dahomia....The odd, bizarre, erotic, and savage was highlighted...Favorite themes included cannibalism, human sacrifice, head hunting, polygamy, unusual dress, and food preferences that repelled Americans (eating dogs, rodents, and insects). (29)

This systematic process of 'othering' individuals, of reproducing the popular idea that the 'freak' possessed some mythic sensibility, stripped the objectified individual of both dignity and agency; he/she became inextricably bound to an identity that he/she had no part in creating. Thus, like the colonial movement afoot at the same moment in history, the 'Freak Show' forced its subjects into a position of voicelessness and dependency. In addition, it naturalized the colonial assumption that certain individuals, simply by virtue of race and/or material characteristics, were inherently superior or inferior to others.

Oliver's third and final historical theory of the individual model of disability involves the 'surplus population thesis'. Oliver maintains that in societies where one's economic status is in a constant state of flux and tension, a Darwinian 'survival-of-the fittest' mentality becomes its driving force. Consequently, those considered unable, for whatever reasons, to sustain the normative levels of economic production are ostracized and relegated to the margins of society. Photographer and writer David Hevey, in his study *The Creatures Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery*, draws a direct

correlation between this socio-economic pattern and the Eugenics movement of the Second World War. Eugenics, the process of eliminating 'inferior' genes from the social gene pool, is founded on two philosophical convictions: a belief in the perfectibility of the human species and an unshakable faith in science and medicine as the supreme forms of human knowledge. Eugenics, moreover, validates the assumption that material characteristics are accurate indicators of an individual's social worth or non worth. According to Hevey,

> Much of the theory of eugenics, when it affected disabled people, was a rationalization and institutionalization of the segregation of disabled people into legislative action to 'solve' the 'problem' of the sub species of disabled people. The 'Final Solution' was to monitor and control 'legally' the sexuality and birth rights of many groups of disabled people. (30)

Unlike the first two historical phases underpinning the individual model of disability, this final phase proved to be the most horrific and injurious for individuals with disabilities. The sheer number of individuals institutionalized or executed during the onset of the Nazi biomedical campaign, for instance (Joseph Shapiro estimates some 200,000 men, women and children with disabilities were victims of this systematic genocide), evinces the extent to which people with disabilities have been seen, in the past as well as the present,[3] as less-than-human and, thus, deserving of *inhumane* treatment.

In his groundbreaking text *Attitudes and Disabled People* (1980), Victor Finkelstein also attempts to pinpoint the origins of the individual model of disability; unlike Oliver, however, Finkelstein surveys the model from a 'historical-materialist' perspective. In the feudal, pre-Industrial era, the first of what Finkelstein delineates to be three historical

phases of disability, the 'disabled' as a separate demographic had not materialized in the social sphere. Although individuals with impairments were identified in this era as being members of a lower economic class, their exclusion from participating in the mainstream modes of economic production had not yet been initiated. In phase two, however, a dramatic shift in the means of economic production had immediate and, more often than not, devastating effects on individuals with impairments. With the onset of the Industrial Revolution, for instance, production lines began to be geared to able-bodied norms and produced what Hevey describes as "clear assumptions of a more or less constant notion of labour-power within individual and collective workers" (15). What followed from this action was the declaration that a now 'disabled' labour power existed in society. This segregation practice, in turn, triggered a chain reaction of sorts; not only did it spawn the growth of asylums and needs-based institutions – facilities used to house and supervise the new 'deviant' social bodies – but it also created a window of opportunity for the introduction of impairment specialist workers and disability professionals. It galvanized, moreover, the medical/clinical model of disability (a model I will speak of in greater detail in a moment) and its assumption that an ideal corporeal body exists in a 'natural' form. In phase three, a phase Finkelstein situates in the present, a shift in how we understand and articulate disability is again underway. In this phase, according to Finkelstein, disability is being increasingly understood *not* as a defect contained within the body, but as a product of an unadaptive and exclusionary social organization that does little if anything to

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[3] One need only recall the events surrounding the 1997 Robert Latimer case – the defense, verdict and sentencing, in particular – for a recent example of how individuals with disabilities are (mis)treated under

accommodate the needs of individuals with impairments. This progression from an 'individual' to a 'social' model of disability marks the advent of a new civil rights movement, a movement intent on securing equal rights and opportunities for all individuals. Finkelstein is quick to note, however, that the road to this egalitarian social order remains barred by the seemingly all-encompassing medical/clinical apparatus presently in charge of defining and, in turn, controlling disability.

In twentieth-century Western society – a world of science, technology and medicalized reality – the medical/clinical model of disability has attained the status of unproblematic 'certainty'. This model holds, as its fore-running credo, the position that disability is located solely on the physical body and marks the presence of an 'inferior' material characteristic. This assumption that the body can be ordered by rigorous empirical methods and technical gadgetry is based primarily on the conviction that a single version of the perfect human specimen exists in reality. Nirmalia Erevelles, in her article "Disability and the Dialectics of Difference," notes that such medical views "presume disability to be a biological constant made readily apparent by 'nature' and assumed to be outside of all historical frames of understanding that condition modes of normality" (521). What Erevelles and her supporters submit in rebuttal is that the standards of physical strength, virility, intelligence and beauty which the medical establishment use to measure health and ability are perpetually bound to a culture's social and historical composition. David Clark and Catherine Myser, in their article "Being Humaned: Medical Documentaries and the Hyperrealization of Conjoined Twins," reproduce a similar argument:

Canadian Law.

> ...what seems to be given or 'natural' about the materiality of the body is inevitably caught up in a network of culturally and historically variable assumptions – what Foucault calls "regulatory ideal[s]" – that function in prescriptive ways to differentiate between 'normal' and 'abnormal' forms of corporeality. (350)

The apparent incontestability or, to use Roland Barthes's terms, "neutral and innocent" (125) consciousness of the medical/clinical model of normality (and, by turns, abnormality) has immediate, often cataclysmic repercussions for those deemed 'disabled'.[4] In many cases, the 'disabled' become embedded in power systems that define who they are, what their strengths and limitations are, and what role they are to assume in the social order. Moreover, as occupants of the 'sick-role,' the 'disabled' are expected to regain health and become able-bodied again or, if that is medically impossible, to conform to whatever diagnoses and recommendations their medical professional proposes. The 'disabled,' in many instances, are seen not as human beings with personalities and histories, but as inert and passive bodies to be corrected, rewired and realigned. The immediate result is that their personhood is obscured by their patienthood, and their ability to forge

[4] I must make it perfectly clear that although I am refuting the medical/clinical model of disability and the assumptions it is founded on, I am in no way suggesting that modern science and medicine are ineffective in alleviating pain and suffering – to make such a claim would be ludicrous in the face of the recent barrage of technologic and scientific advances responsible for prolonging the lives of millions of people worldwide. I am positing, instead, that in certain contexts, medical and rehabilitation professionals, via their emphasis on restoring the 'abnormal' patient to a state of normalcy, 'other' individuals and rob them of the power to assume viable forms of agency over their lives. By forcing the patient into a sick-role and, in turn, a state of dependency, the medical establishment negates that individual's human right to liberty and self-definition. Thus, I am not suggesting that all work conducted within a medical/clinical setting should be seen as necessarily detrimental, but rather that certain assumptions and stereotypical attitudes toward the 'disabled' – namely, that disability is the mark of a deviant/abnormal body and, as such, must be purged or at least controlled – are what disables individuals in the first place. Michael Oliver, in his article "Medicine and Disability: Steps in the Wrong Direction," summarizes the point I am trying to make quite nicely: "the aim of research should not be to make the legless normal, whatever that may mean, but to create a social environment where to be legless is irrelevant" (137).

their own identities is consumed and, thus, denied by a larger social apparatus. Michael Oliver aptly summarizes this process:

> The whole medical and rehabilitation enterprise is founded upon an ideology of normality...Its aim is to restore the disabled person to normality, whatever that may mean. Where that is not possible, the basic aim is not abandoned; the goal is to restore the disabled person to a state that is as near normality as possible. So, surgical intervention and physical rehabilitation, whatever its costs in terms of the pain and suffering of disabled individuals, is always justified and justifiable – the ideology of normality rules. (37)

Due to our culture's overwhelming confidence in science and medicine, medical/clinical definitions of disability seldom meet with opposition; what the medical/clinical model defines as 'abnormal,' how its solutions are conceived and who it targets, for instance, attract little attention from the social body because the model has attained the status of unproblematic 'given'. French theorist Roland Barthes is particularly apprehensive of any idea that attempts to pass itself off as 'truth,' and argues that it is precisely that which 'goes-without-saying' that must be most vociferously spoken about. Accordingly, Barthes teaches his reader to be suspicious of any such anxious reproduction of normality and of the way it attempts to homogenize and harmonize reality. In an effort to unravel exactly how such ideas achieve and sustain a naturalized status in a culture, we must turn our attention to Barthes and his fascinating theoretical conception of 'myth'.

Understanding 'Myth': Roland Barthes's Mythologies

> **The starting point of these reflections was usually a feeling of impatience at the sight of the 'naturalness' with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history...I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there.**
>
> Roland Barthes, Preface to *Mythologies* (1957)

In his influential text *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes suggests that what a society perceives to be natural is, in fact, a *myth* that has been filtered through a complex web of opportunistic agendas. In the text's 28 short journalistic articles and its longer theoretical essay "Myth Today," Barthes attempts to analyze, through the lenses of pop-culture and semiology, how the post World War II French culture – a mass culture controlled and defined by the ubiquitous hegemony of the bourgeoisie – constructs and, subsequently, polices its own versions of reality. He maintains that the bourgeoisie's "depoliticized speech" (142), or that which makes unproblematic the constructed nature of reality, abolishes the complexity of human acts by giving them the "simplicity of essences" (143). This 'mythic' speech has, in Barthes's terms, "turned reality inside out, it has emptied it of history and has filled it with nature, it has removed from things their human meaning so as to make them signify a human insignificance" (142-143). Thus, Barthes is highly suspicious of the naturalness of any normative meaning, and experiences it not as a divine 'truth' but as a device used to legitimize and re-inscribe the agendas of the dominant culture.

For Barthes, the reason myth achieves this privileged position in a culture is that the social body assumes that language is capable of representing truth. Barthes vehemently affirms, however, that language is and always will be a contaminated form; it signifies more than itself, and is forever adding meaning to its own particular versions of reality. Accordingly, he insists that the events and attitudes that define a culture must be analyzed through the optics of semiology and linguistics if we are to properly understand the

profusion of systems at work beneath its surface. To explain how these systems materialize in society, Barthes uses a process of semiology based on Ferdinand de Saussure's 1959 analysis of the 'essence' and schematic organization of language. Saussure's primary objective in his *Course in General Linguistics* was to unearth the very systems that underlie language, the very internal processes of signification that make communication between human beings possible. Language, in his assessment, is not an individual process, but a product passively assimilated by a social body; it is not, then, the 'fourth natural kingdom,' but an instrument of social control unwittingly obeyed by a community of individuals.

In addition to this central concept, two basic assumptions characterize Saussure's understanding of language. The first involves what he considers to be the dual nature of the 'sign'. For Saussure, language is composed of both a 'signifier' (sound image) and a 'signified' (concept) and the combination of these two elements produces a 'sign'. This formula constitutes what Barthes describes as a 'first-order' semiological system (114). The second assumption that Saussure's theory of language is founded upon is that the 'sign' is arbitrary in nature. Saussure's most radical assertions revolve around this idea that signs are what they are simply by chance; signs are unmotivated and, therefore, alterable. This revolutionary separation of the concept from the referent, the signified from the signifier, appealed enormously to Barthes who also resisted the conventional idea that there is an innate connection between words and the objects or ideas they are supposed to represent. Barthes maintains, instead, that what we think we know about ourselves and everything around us is a myth that has been naturalized via the social practices of naming,

labeling and categorizing. In the forward to Epston and White's *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, Karl Tomm accurately characterizes our place within this system:

> As human beings in language we are in fact all subjugated by invisible social controls of presuppositional linguistic practices and implicit socio-cultural patterns of co-ordination...Thus in the social domain knowledge and power are inextricably interrelated.

To explore the multifaceted dimensions of this knowledge/power relationship, Barthes takes Saussure's ideas about language a dimension further by placing pre-existing signification patterns (first-order semiological systems) into a "second-order semiological system" (114). In this second-order system, this domain of 'mythic' speech, language moves beyond the apparent innocence of the first-order; it selects from the previously established sign that which supports its own interests, and ignores that which does not. The original meaning of the sign, in the meantime, is altered or, in many instances, completely abandoned. Mythic speech, then, usurps 'first-order' signification in an act of what Barthes calls "language robbery" (131), and replaces it with meanings that serve its own agendas.

To illustrate how this process of mythic speech works in society, Barthes deconstructs the cover of the popular French magazine *Paris Match*. For Barthes, the image of a young black officer firmly saluting the French flag on the cover of the magazine constitutes a denotative or first-order system of signification. This first-order system conveys the following: *Young Man - French Uniform - Saluting.* At the exact moment this first-order system enters his consciousness, however, Barthes finds himself confronted with a connotative system of meaning, a second-order semiological system which suggests:

> France is a great empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors. (116)

In this second-order semiological system, the personal history of the French soldier is relegated to the background so that the myth – in this case, a disguised instance of imperial paternalism – can recreate the subject in its own image. As Barthes suggests, a "conjuring trick has taken place" (142) on the cover of the magazine whereby myth has "empt[ied] reality: it is, literally, a ceaseless flowing out, a haemorrhage...a perceptible absence" (143). Thus, mythic language undergoes a process of transformation wherein first-order speech is "stolen and restored" (123) into a second-order system; this system, in turn, conceals itself and its opportunistic motives behind the pretense that its message is unmediated and innocent. Michael Tager, in his article "Myth and Politics in the Works of Sorel and Barthes," describes the danger of a signification process that actively conceals its cultural dimensions:

> Myth obliterated the memory that peoples were once conquered, hierarchies once imposed, and objects once made...The dominant class purified its history and motives through myth, which also taught subordinate people to obey and to accept the status quo. (632)

The 'Social Model' of Disability: Demythologizing the Disability Myth

The role of the demythologist, as Barthes sees it, is to expose mythic speech for the artificial construct that it is and to reveal, to an otherwise unassuming social body, that what appears to be natural is always determined by culture. For the disability theorist/demythologist, in turn, the privileged position of the 'individual model' of disability within twentieth century Western thought is the site upon which he/she must set his/her

demythologizing gaze. Bickenbach, in his study of physical disability in Canada, initiates this process by suggesting that "handicaps are socially constructed phenomena brought about by attitudes toward people with disabilities which, once embedded in social practices and institutions, sustain the disadvantageous social condition of people with disabilities" (13). Bickenbach's statement echoes the thematic current running through much of the contemporary scholarship on disability related issues by reiterating the notion that 'disability', as we know it, is nothing but a sophisticated myth, a wholly social construct. In the introduction to their critical study *Images of the Disabled, Disabling Images*, Alan Gartner and Tom Joe lend support to Bickenbach's claim:

> The characterization of persons with disabilities as invalid – pronounced either way – is more a function of the images, the 'disabling images,' held by both so-called able-bodied and disabled individuals alike, than of the actual conditions of the individuals. (1)

This strain of criticism, one that defines disability as a socially constructed phenomenon rather than a flaw located within the body, marks a dramatic shift away from both the individual and medical/clinical models of disability. This 'social model' locates disability squarely within society and claims that prejudice, discrimination and unconstitutional social/public barriers are the major obstacles disabling citizens with impairments. Ingstad and Reynolds Whyte, in their critical text *Disability and Culture*, posit a similar assertion:

> Disability in Europe and North America exists within – and is created by – a framework of state, legal, economic, and biomedical institutions. Concepts of personhood, identity, and value, while not reducible to institutions, are nevertheless shaped by them. (10)

In his comprehensive study *Understanding Disability From Theory to Practice*, Michael Oliver resurrects from the annals of the since folded UPIAS (Union of the

Physically Impaired Against Segregation) the document that initiated this movement toward redefining disability within a social context. The importance of this 1976 document entitled *Fundamental Principles of Disability* cannot be understated as it stands as one of the first written attempts made by individuals with impairments to forge a collective identity and to define, in their own terms, what disability is and who it is that should be labeled 'disabled'. The UPIAS's primary objectives and concerns read as follows:

> In our view, it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society...we define...disability as the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities. (quoted in Oliver 22)

If we were to reexamine, from the perspective of the social model, the examples of disability I mentioned earlier – namely, that an individual is considered disabled if his/her impairment restricts him/her from mounting a public bus, eating at the restaurant of his/her choice, or reading a university textbook – our presumptions about what constitutes disability undergo a dramatic reversal. From this new perspective, the individual's inability to partake in these activities arises not from his/her impairment (as the individual model would have it) but from the society that systematically disables him/her; it is not the impairment that limits the individual from full participation in society, but the restrictive and unadaptive barriers imposed by a social organization that caters to an able-bodied majority. Accordingly, the aim of the UPIAS's *Fundamental Principles of Disability* and similar

such documents is to incite Governmental[5] changes in policy and action, changes which will ensure that all citizens are granted equal rights, opportunities and dignity under the law.

Martha's Vineyard: The 'Social Model' in Action

Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language, Nora Groce's historical/theoretical study of hereditary deafness on Martha's Vineyard, validates the presuppositions upon which the social model of disability is founded. In her examination of the various social dynamics at work in a community with a large population of individuals with hearing impairments, Groce arrives at the conclusion that disability, despite its conventional definition, is ultimately culturally relative. According to Groce's research, deafness was commonplace on Martha's Vineyard since its first deaf resident, Jonathan Lambert, settled there in 1694. Lambert, a carrier of a recessive gene for deafness, passed his genetic makeup on to generations of his descendants; in the nineteenth century, for instance, incidents of deafness on the Island were as high as 1 in every 155, a substantially different figure from the national rate of 1 in every 5,728 (Groce 3). In contrast to the national trend of excluding individuals with hearing impairments from full participation in the economic and social spheres of society, citizens with hereditary deafness on Martha's Vineyard enjoyed the same quality and standard of living as their hearing neighbors. Groce contends that the primary agent accountable for this harmonious social atmosphere was the community's

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[5] The word 'Government' is used here in a Foucauldian context. For Michel Foucault, Government is comprised not only of state institutions but of any and all facilities and mechanisms that shape social policies and/or norms. Alden Chadwick, in his article "Knowledge, Power and the Disability Discrimination Bill," summarizes Foucault's use of the term: "...government must be allowed a very broad meaning which encompasses shaping, channeling and guiding the conduct of others...governing could be located in both the state and civil society" (38).

willingness to collectively learn sign language. A reporter from the 1895 *Boston Sunday Herald* describes the Island's communal bilingualism as follows:

> You make a neighborly call – they don't have such things as afternoon teas. The spoken language and the sign language will be so mingled in the conversation that you pass from one to the other, or use both at once, almost unconsciously. Half the family speak, very probably, half do not, but the mutes are not uncomfortable in their deprivation, the community has adjusted itself to the situation so perfectly. (quoted in Groce 53)

Without the language barrier to restrict individuals with hearing impairments from active participation in community activities, social barriers in Martha's Vineyard were virtually non-existent. A variety of statistics collected by Groce and others supports her assertions that individuals with hearing impairments were treated with the same respect and granted the same opportunities as their hearing companions. For instance, eighty percent of individuals with hearing impairments on Martha's Vineyard were recorded to have been married, a figure which matched the marriage rate for hearing islanders. Moreover, hearing impaired and hearing islanders had an average of six children – a dramatically different statistic than the national record which estimated that the average deaf-hearing couple had only 2.6 children (Shapiro 87). According to Joseph Shapiro, deaf and hearing islanders on Martha's Vineyard

> ...held the same jobs and therefore enjoyed similar income levels; they played cards and drank together. ...Martha's Vineyard was a nineteenth-century deaf utopia, where deafness was ordinary, not a sickness. Nor was it disabling, largely because the island's hearing residents were bilingual. (86-87)

What this data ostensibly suggests is that at this particular place and moment in history, individuals with hearing impairments neither struggled to be accepted nor fought for personal independence because their community made adaptations to ensure equal

rights, access and empowerment for all its members. Thus, Martha's Vineyard provides us with a microcosmic example of how a community can either enable or disable its populace. Moreover, what is implicitly understated in this historical example is the idea that disability is culturally determined; it is not a universal symptom of inferiority worn on the body of the unfortunate that determines disability but society's failure to ensure adequate public services and equal rights for all its citizenry. This idea frames the social model of disability and its conviction that disability arises *not* from a physical or mental impairment but from the restrictions – inadequate access to buildings, unadaptive work spaces, restrictive public transit, segregated education, inappropriate labeling practices, etc. – imposed by an oppressive and discriminatory society.

(Mis)Representing Disability

At this point in our study we must stop and ask ourselves: What is the major obstacle barring the cultural acceptance of the social model of disability? Why, despite the efforts of those within and without the *Disability Rights* movement, are people with disabilities still treated as second-class citizens, as enemies of the corporeal norm? As with most cases of minority oppression and exclusion, the root of the problem can be traced to the discriminatory *attitudes* internalized by a culture's majority. For our purposes, these attitudes most often reflect the popular assumptions that 'disability-equals-other' and that the 'disabled', simply by virtue of their impairments, are inherently inferior to the able-bodied community. When faced with such a widely accepted definition of disability we must, as Barthean demythologists, investigate and, in turn, reveal the social mechanisms at work in naturalizing this seemingly unproblematic ideal.

Amid a plethora of social and historical variables possibly responsible for legitimizing disability myths stands a medium that has functioned, for centuries, as a barometer for gauging the spirit of a culture: *Literature*. Images of disability, whether in the shape of the blind soothsayer of ancient Greece, the demonic 'cripple' of the Elizabethan age, or the facially deformed villain generously scattered throughout the contemporary 'crime/mystery' genre, have been a staple in literature throughout its recorded history.[6] What is consistent in most of these representations is that the individual's impairment is his/her defining feature as well as a symbol of his/her internal worthiness. In such representations, the abject mind and/or body of the character with a disability becomes a message to be read, a metaphor to be de-scrambled. The immediate consequence of this objectification is that the disabled subject's individuality – the multifarious dimensions that constitute his/her personality and history – is eclipsed by his/her disability; he/she becomes identified and defined solely by his/her 'otherness' and, as such, is robbed of both personhood and dignity.

Shakespeare's *Richard III* is perhaps the most notorious example of the exploitation of disability as a metaphor for conveying a larger theoretical idea. From the moment "Richard Crookback" steps on stage and utters his first speech, his impairment becomes an emblem if not the very cause of his tortured, malicious persona:

> But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks
> Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass;
> I, that am rudely stamped, and want love's majesty

[6] In the last decade or so, a myriad of scholarly works tracing the (mis)representation of individuals with disabilities in literature has surfaced from both within and without the Disability Rights movement. See, in particular, Biklen (1987), Gartner & Joe (1987), Zola (1987), Kriegel (1988) and Hevey (1992).

To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;
I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion,
Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time
Into this breathing world scarce half made up,
And that so lamely and unfashionable
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them -
Why I, in this weak piping time of peace,
Have no delight to pass away the time,
Unless to spy my shadow in the sun
And descant on mine own deformity.
And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
I am determined to prove a villain
And hate the idle pleasures of these days. (I,i,14-31)

This image of what Leonard Kriegel describes as the "demonic cripple" (33) is a stock literary characterization used to create a superbly malignant villain. Beyond what some might argue is a harmless representation, however, looms the mythic assumption that disability necessarily involves the loss of one's moral resolve and capacity for mercy and compassion. In Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Richard epitomizes this image of the 'demonic cripple,' the heartless killer capable of destroying any and all who bar his monomaniacal quest for personal gain. In Shakespeare's drama, Richard, a 'hunchback' from birth, seeks the glory and power associated with the English throne to compensate for his 'abnormal' physical appearance. Deceit and calculated terror become his *modus operandi* and assist him in the murders of Lady Anne, Clarence, King Edward, Queen Elizabeth's kindred, Hastings, the Princes, and Buckingham. What is important for the disability theorist/demythologist to notice is that in the midst of these murderous plots, Shakespeare consistently emphasizes how Richard's impairments condition his barbaric temperament. From scene to scene, for instance, the nature of Richard's impairment is always hovering in

the background and, as such, perpetuates the notion that the king's vile persona is somehow derived from his grotesque physical form. In his article "Richard III's Disfigurement: A Medical Postscript," E.W. Jones reproduces this idea that Richard's physical characteristics are accurate determinants of his 'defective' spiritual and emotional composition: "The crookedness of Richard's spine is *truly matched* to the tortuosity of his malign character" (218 my emphasis).

For the Elizabethan audience, Richard's physical impairments serve not only as the source of his cunning and murderous actions, but as a symbol of the degenerate state of England after years of civil war and internal turmoil. His hunched-back, in particular, mobilizes the image of a dejected state, of a broken and, thus, incomplete social body. The collective assumption that follows is that the acts of violence, deceit and hypocrisy which characterized England at the time spawned a monster upon its throne. Richard is presented, then, as a form of punishment for England's past sins and for her willing disregard for God's will (the King, it must be remembered, was seen as God's anointed representative). The prime reason this symbolism works as successfully as it does in the play is because a Judeo-Christian ethic hovers in the minds of Shakespeare's audience; the teachings of the Old and New Testaments, of the idea that physical deviations from the norm mark divine punishment, transfer over smoothly onto Shakespeare's sinful king. Thus, Shakespeare, ever conscious of the popular formula 'disability-equals-evil,' strengthens the suspense and drama of his play by reproducing (and, thus, legitimizing) a natural parallel between Richard's actions and his impairments.

The recent barrage of scholarly work on the historical dimensions of Shakespeare's *Richard III* shed further light on the playwright's motivations for casting Richard in such a harsh and unsympathetic mold. Historians such as Jones, Kendall and Rossiter maintain that Shakespeare, following the example of Sir Thomas More (an avid supporter of the Tudor dynasty), manipulated the facts of Richard's physical appearance to make him appear ominous and pitiless before an Elizabethan audience. Jones submits that Shakespeare disseminated this Tudor view of Richard as a 'crook-back' villain to "please Queen Elizabeth herself and to remind her subjects of benefits bestowed upon them by the Tudor dynasty" (212). Not only does the perpetuation of this Tudor myth exhibit Shakespeare's enthusiastic appropriation of the conventional idea that the 'twisted' body signals the presence of the 'twisted' soul, but it confirms his willingness to distort various components of Richard's history and personality for the sake of his own political and artistic interests. Consequently, like the French Soldier on the cover of Barthes's copy of *Paris Match*, Richard degenerates into a spiritless receptacle for his creator's deterministic agendas. Thus, Shakespeare's portrait of Richard signifies more than it appears to; 'Richard Crookback' is not simply a King with a physical impairment but an inherently evil and merciless villain with little regard for upholding the virtue of the English throne (a virtue subsequently restored by the upright and eternally sanctioned Tudor dynasty).

For individuals with disabilities, this artistic fusion of body and soul has lasting and, in most instances, detrimental social repercussions. When the external corporeal form becomes a symbol of one's internal dynamics, the assumption that follows is that impairments – naturalized material 'defects,' flaws which have, throughout history, signaled

an individual's deviation from the 'normal' able-bodied population – are transparent and true indicators of one's insufficient and inferior persona. The culturally-determined inferior bodies, in turn, become victims of various forms of discrimination and stigmatization, and are cast, by the monologic able-bodied majority, to the margins of society. In this segregated domain, these (to tweak somewhat the title of Judith Butler's influential theoretical text) 'bodies that *do not* matter' are denied the ability to forge their own identities and are stripped of their fundamental rights to equality and dignity. They become, in Butler's words, "abject beings" (3), individuals who, by virtue of their apparent differences, occupy the "'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life" (3).

In Graham Greene's novel *A Burnt-Out Case*, disability is, once again, exploited as a means to an author's visionary end. The central metaphor of *A Burnt-Out Case* revolves around the idea that the disastrous effects of success and hypocrisy (specifically their propensity to rob an individual of voice and agency) can be understood in relation to the physical and emotional ravages of leprosy. The protagonist Querry is the *figurative* 'burnt-out case' of the novel's title; he is emotionally and psychologically wounded by the destructive forces of his past and seeks only to be left to his own devices. The two epigraphs Greene chooses for his novel adeptly introduce this controlling metaphor. Like Querry and the 'leper' he is seen to emulate, the voice of Dante's haunting phrase, "'Io non mori, e non rimasi vivo' (I did not die, yet nothing of life remained)" is passionless and spent, and seemingly doomed to a life devoid of happiness or peace. In the novel's second epigraph, Wardekar, a world-renowned doctor famous for his work with leprosy patients, describes a similar state of atrophy:

> Though with time [the leper] becomes reconciled to his deformities, it is only at the conscious level. His sub-conscious mind, which continues to bear the mark of injury, brings about certain changes in his whole personality, making him suspicious of society.

The 'leper,' in Wardekar's assessment, exists in emotional limbo; despite being cured of his debilitating disease he is always conscious of its dehumanizing effects and of the scars left in its wake. Such are the defining characteristics of Querry when we are first introduced to him. Like the patients he meets in the leproserie, he is overwhelmed by a desire to deflect attention away from his emotional scars and mutilations and, thus, derives little pleasure from the everyday processes of living. Greene implies throughout the novel that Querry must learn to embrace this feeling of vulnerability and to welcome the kindness of others if he is to be cured of his indifference. In order to reach this state of emotional liberation, however, Querry must first come to terms with the nature of his 'disease'.

Deo Gratias, one of the leproserie's patients, becomes the primary vehicle through which Querry's self-actualization is realized; he acts as Querry's mirror, an alter-ego who has also been made a victim of an injurious fate. Greene tells us at an early stage in the novel that both Deo Gratias and Querry are burnt-out cases (the former, a victim of leprosy, the later, of success and exploitation) and that they must find some way to reconcile their past with their present if they are to endure their futures. What is interesting and, by turns, disheartening for the disability theorist, however, is the fact that we only trace the progress of one of the characters – the other simply gets lost in the shuffle. From the start of the novel to its conclusion, for instance, we learn little of Deo Gratias's past and virtually nothing about the characteristics that define his adult persona. Instead, Deo

Gratias becomes 'Deo Gratias-the-leper,' and serves only as a spiritless looking-glass through which Querry can contemplate his own predicament. Thus, Deo Gratias exists in the novel merely as a symbolic representation of Querry's internal dilemmas and not as a convincing character with a personality and a past. Moreover, like Shakespeare's Richard, Deo Gratias exists only in relation to his impairment; his body and soul become synonymous, and his history and personality, obsolete. Implicit in this representation is the idea that individuals with disabilities are mysterious 'others,' subhuman entities that can be rendered only in a symbolic or abstract light. C. Safilios-Rothschild, in *The Sociology and Social Psychology of Disability and Rehabilitation*, describes the repercussions of this systematic 'othering' for the 'disabled' subject:

> ... he will either be considered weak and inferior, incapable of doing anything, or possessed of exceptional capacities and abilities. Very seldom will he be evaluated on the basis of his knowledge, abilities, skills, strengths, and weaknesses. And since stereotypes are often attached to categories of people singled out because of one "negative" attribute in common, those belonging to a category (a minority group) are evaluated on the basis of these stereotypes. Thus, the disabled are assessed by the nondisabled on the basis of the overall stereotype attached to their specific disability. And since these stereotypes are usually negative, most of the time the disabled are discriminated against by the nondisabled because the assessment stops at the recognition of the presence of disability. (111)

What is evident from both examples of conventional literary representations of disability is the extent to which culturally-deemed 'anomalous' bodies are exploited for the authors' own opportunistic (political and artistic) ends. Because such bodies have, for centuries, been perceived as deviants of the cultural norm, Shakespeare and Greene are able to tap into their audience's feelings of fear, loathing and pity to strengthen the various dimensions of their art. In the meantime, however, a profusion of disability myths – the

idea that disability is the natural mark of evil and otherness, that an impairment is an individual's defining feature, that people with disabilities are inherently inferior to the able-bodied – are re-inscribed as unproblematic and, thus, unquestionable certainties.

Demythologizing Disability: Angela Carter

Despite these and thousands of similarly oppressive literary images of disability, many writers have, in recent years, taken the initiative to expose the artificial assumptions ordering disability myths. Like Barthes's demythologist, these writers focus their creative efforts on denaturalizing so-called 'truths' and revealing the power structures at work in defining what constitutes the social status quo. Despite its multifarious objectives and characteristics, the postmodern text, in particular, seems grounded in this specific theoretical principle. In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon stresses the significant role 'demythology' plays in postmodern theory and art:

> ...the postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us. (2)

Postmodern works of literature endorse a type of collective skepticism, a dialectic space wherein culturally-fixed 'essences' can be re-problematized and subverted. "The postmodern" affirms Hutcheon, "is not a degeneration into 'hyperreality' but a questioning of what reality can mean and how we can come to know it" (34). This postmodern skepticism necessarily includes a reexamination of how a culture comes to understand and articulate its history. Hutcheon's oft-quoted term *historiographic metafiction* draws on

this postmodern preoccupation with both the 'making' of history and the 'making' of art. She insists, for instance, that postmodern fiction

> ...asks its readers to question the processes by which we represent our selves and our world to ourselves and to become aware of the means by which we *make* sense of and *construct* order out of experience in our particular culture. (53-54)

Thus, by foregrounding *itself* as a conflicted space, the postmodern work of literature becomes a viable model for challenging homogenizing myths and societal norms. What is so paradoxical and intriguing about this strategy is the fact that postmodern writers themselves participate in and are subject to the myth-making process. They are self-consciously aware that even their own fictions are caught up in the political, economical and ideological systems of their time. Accordingly, postmodern writers must be content to question reality and discursive 'truth' from inside the very same systems they are attempting to critique. Hutcheon aptly characterizes the nature of this duality:

> Postmodern texts paradoxically point to the opaque nature of their representational strategies and at the same time to their complicity with the notion of the transparency of representation - a complicity shared, of course, by anyone who pretends even to describe their 'de-doxifying' tactics. (18)

Armed with this awareness of the paradoxical nature of fiction, of its ability to both liberate and confine, Angela Carter, in her fascinating postmodern novel *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman,*[7] sets out to explore and, subsequently, explode the mythical binaries ordering society. Like her protagonist, Desiderio, Carter embarks on a quest to re-problematize and, thus, deprivilegize the monologic myth-making systems at work in defining reality. She strives for the total destabilization of systems of hierarchical

patterning, and encourages her readers to be suspicious of any and all ideas that attempt to pass themselves off as 'truth'. Carter, the self-declared 'demythologist', holds as her driving principle the Barthean idea that society is immersed in a sea of false universals. Like Barthes's demythologist, she attempts to find "under the assumed innocence of the most unsophisticated relationships, the profound attention which this innocence is meant to make one accept" (*Mythologies* 154). Moreover, she insists that it is impossible to ever gain unmediated access to reality and that any representation attempting to prove otherwise is always a fabricated and dangerous myth. In "Notes From the Front Line," Carter further elucidates her theoretical position: "I believe that all myths are products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice...they are extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree" (70).

In an effort to deprivilegize the 'extraordinary lies' perpetuated by the naturalized individual model of disability, Carter parodically casts her 'disabled' characters in the traditional literary roles of the blind soothsayer, the maladjusted and perpetually angry victim of circumstance, the demonic, diabolical monster and the 'freak'. Parody is an appropriate tool for this operation as it functions, by definition, to subvert the hegemonies with which myths are mobilized. Such a technique, however, is contradictory in nature; it demands that the parodied subject be reproduced convincingly before it can be deconstructed. Carter, ever-conscious of this danger, incorporates hyperbole into her

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[7] In an effort to save space and to maintain some semblance of fluidity, the title of Carter's text will be henceforth referred to as *Doctor Hoffman*.

parodic form to heighten its didactic function. This fusion of structural devices makes explicit her attempt to destabilize the cultural construction of disability.

In her depiction of the peep-show proprietor/professor, Carter deploys and, subsequently, destabilizes the conventional literary construction of the blind 'seer'. Analogous to Sophocles' Teiresias, the peep-show proprietor possesses a certain prophetic quality in the novel as the 'slides' he covets foreshadow the events that are to befall Desiderio. Describing his first glimpse of Doctor Hoffman's castle, for instance, Desiderio remembers the "blind philosopher['s]" (120) accurate predictions:

> It did not look as though winter had ever touched it and as we drew nearer...I remembered I had seen a picture of Hoffman's park, a magically transformed picture in which the detail had been heightened but still recognizably a dream vision of this very park. I had seen it in the peep-show. It was the park framed by the female orifice in the first machine of all and when I looked beyond the trees, I saw the very same castle I had seen then. (196)

Carter reproduces this conventional depiction of the 'blind sage' – the individual capable of possessing a mystical understanding of the universe – to critique the literary tendency to exploit disability as a symbol of 'otherness'. With her characterization of the peep-show proprietor, Carter illustrates how such static representations essentially force individuals with impairments to become literary props rather than living, breathing characters with personalities and pasts. In such cases, the impairment and the individual with an impairment become interchangeable, making the persona of the individual secondary in the formation of his/her character. Thus, in her parody of this popular literary representation of disability, Carter challenges the myth that people with disabilities, simply by virtue of their impairments, possess hyper-human powers. More importantly, she destabilizes the

culturally-fixed idea that impairments automatically signal the presence of an abnormal human quality or of the subhuman 'other'.

In a similar parodic formulation, Carter portrays the nameless peep-show proprietor as a maladjusted accident victim. Traditionally, this popular literary representation of disability (one need only recall the earlier example of Shakespeare's Richard for a model of this condition) naturalizes the assumption that an individual loses part of his humanity when he incurs a disability. Paul Longmore, in his article "Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures," maintains that this representation of disability reinforces the socially-accepted idea that "disability is a problem of individual emotional coping and physical overcoming, rather than an issue of social discrimination against a stigmatized minority" (75). Moreover, Longmore submits that such representations typically re-inscribe the myth that deformity of the body necessarily means a deformity of the soul and/or mind. Carter exaggerates and, in turn, re-problematizes this myth through Desiderio's description of the peep-show proprietor:

> ...he was nothing but a piece of verminous flotsam overgrown with a white weed of hair. There was not a single tooth left in his head and a stained and matted beard straggled over the lower part of his face while the upper part was hidden by a pair of wire-rimmed green-tinted glasses, the left lens of which was cracked clean across...His feet were bare; his blackened toe-nails had grown into claws. (43)

These meticulous details – the blackened toe-nails, the white weed of hair – render the peep-show proprietor more of a hideous beast than a full-fledged human being. In doing so, Carter illustrates the logical progression of disability myth: it robs an individual of his personhood and dignity, and substitutes its own realities in its place. Carter has, throughout *Doctor Hoffman*, warned her readers to be suspicious of such reproductions of

'abnormality' and of the way they strip individuals of the power of self-definition. Moreover, with this deliberate objectification of disability, we are once again reminded that in Carter's fiction, as Manlove states, "there are to be no unquestioned singularities, rather an endless reproduction of jarring multiples at odds with them" (151).

A third disability stereotype Carter uses and, subsequently, abuses in her narrative revolves around the image of the malevolent or evil 'cripple'. In his article "The Cripple In Literature," Leonard Kriegel describes how this image typically works:

> The Demonic Cripple burns with his need for vengeance. Because of this, he frightens the 'normals'. He is too singular, too focused on his wound and the needs that wound has created within him. As a consequence, he threatens to unleash a rage so powerful that it will bring everything down in its wake. (35)

Carter, conscious of the didactic power of such images, seizes the opportunity to reveal their artifice. The process she employs for doing so is threefold: firstly, she parodically re-inscribes the stereotypical representation of 'disability-as-evil'; secondly, she provokes our conditioned response to such an image; and thirdly, she subverts and mocks our response, thereby illustrating how we have been duped by the tacit workings of myth. This process is actualized in the novel's final scene when the blood-thirsty Hoffman leaps into a stray wheelchair and sets off in pursuit of Desiderio. The rather comical scene reads as follows:

> The Doctor had leapt into the wheelchair to propel himself more quickly down the long room, for he was slow on his feet. He was showing some emotion at last. His face was working and he gibbered with rage as he shook his useless, empty revolver....He came straight at me in his wheelchair, intending to run me down, but I grasped the arms of the chair and overturned it. He was as weightless as a doll. (216)

In this ingenious scene, Carter parodies the literary tendency to portray the 'disabled' as monomaniacal monsters. Scrambling to make her villain all the more villainous, she places

his able-bodied figure in a wheelchair – a traditional symbol of 'abnormality' and, thus, evil – and wheels him, pistol in hand, toward his nemesis. The wheelchair, in effect, becomes her *deus ex mechina,* a deliberately overdrawn device used to quickly and cleanly resolve the action of her plot. By positioning Hoffman in the wheelchair, Carter *mobilizes* and subsequently mocks the culturally-learned idea that disability necessarily involves the loss of one's self-control and capacity for human compassion. This humorous parody of a conventional literary representation of disability destabilizes the idea that the 'disabled' are threatening 'others' to be feared and destroyed. Moreover, Carter's self-conscious overwriting of this scene reaffirms the Barthean notion that all representations are mediated by culture. When asked in an interview with John Haffenden if she embraces such opportunities for overwriting, Carter emphatically responds, "Embrace them? I would say that I half-suffocate them with the enthusiasm with which I wrap my arms and legs around them" (91).

With her depiction of the 'Freak Show,' Carter once again reveals and re-problematizes the monologic myths organizing a culture's definition of normality. The 'freak', for Carter, is a myth no more real than a hologram; it is not an inherent human quality, but rather the product of our socialization and of the way social institutions manufacture identity. In the Preface to his text *Freak Show*, Robert Bogdan substantiates this claim:

> Freak shows are not about isolated individuals, either on platforms or in an audience. They are about organizations and patterned relationships between them and us. 'Freak' is not a quality that belongs to the person on display. It is something that we created: a perspective, a set of practices – a social construction. (Preface x-xi)

In *Doctor Hoffman,* Carter parodically casts her Freak Show performers in an exoticized mold to reveal how such establishments non-apologetically profit from the naturalized 'normal/abnormal' binary in place in society. Desiderio's description of the Freak Show, for instance, deliberately reproduces the mythic assumption that the 'freak' lies beyond the boundaries of humanity:

> The traveling fair was its own world, which acknowledged no geographical location or temporal situation for everywhere we halted was exactly the same as where we had stopped last...Japanese dwarfs who wrestled together in arenas of mud;...a team of dancing Albinos whose pallid gavottes were like those of the luminous undead; the bearded lady and the alligator man - these were my new neighbors. (98)

Carter hints, via this parodic representation, that the mythical 'we-they' system of opposition at work in society permits and often rewards inequitable treatment of those who do not conform to the culture's psychological, physical or emotional norms. The 'bearded lady' and the 'alligator man,' for instance, are enmeshed in a system of control that delineates and polices the roles they are to assume in the social order. Because they are perceived as being guilty of transgressing a universal standard of normality and, in turn, morality, they are denied the basic right to personal liberty and self-definition. Throughout the novel, Carter has challenged this desire to 'other' individuals, to measure them against wholly arbitrary standards of normalcy. She maintains that such a binary vision is entirely the product of our socialization and *not* of a 'truth' passed down from a transcendental force. Thus, by illustrating the systems at work in creating the freak, Carter reveals how the so-called 'freak-of-nature' is, as Rosemarie Garland Thomson sees it, a "freak-of-culture" (10).

In *Doctor Hoffman*, Carter continually produces and undermines discursive 'truth' to make clear to her reader the very constructedness of all monologic realities. She sets up hierarchies only to subvert them, and encourages her readers to see truth as multidimensional rather than singular. Moreover, as a self-affirmed crusader in the "demythologizing business" (*Notes* 4), Carter actively destabilizes the mythic able-bodied/disabled binary at work in our culture as well as the presuppositions that make such a definition of humanity possible. In her text *Angela Carter*, Allison Lee expands on the author's motivations for viewing reality through this demythologizing lens:

> Carter sees her own responsibility as directed toward raising the issues and pointing out their relevance, and her aim is to heighten awareness and encourage change; but the reader also has a responsibility. Reading Carter's works is always an active process, and this equal exchange between reader and text finally allows new formulations to arise from the old. (11)

Conclusion

What Carter and her contemporaries expect from their readers is a willingness to delve deep beneath the surfaces of conventional wisdom. Included in this domain of uncontested ideas seemingly sanctioned by *nature* and *truth* is the 'individual' model of disability and its assertion that an individual's impairment automatically constitutes his/her dissension from the ranks of normality. To combat these myths we, as demythologists, must set our sites on collapsing the abnormal/normal dichotomy presently defining the corporeal body. Roy Miki, in his article "Asiancy: Making Space for Asian Canadian Writing," expands (although in a different context) on the importance of denaturalizing this unjust binary:

> Perhaps the critical methodology that is called for at present is one that can articulate difference in such a way that the very notion of 'otherness,' which western thought has used to centralize 'selfness' as source, as hierarchically prior, becomes obsolete as a way of defining people and cultures. What is important for a culture to thrive is a renewed belief in the viability of agency, so that writers from a diversity of subject-positions can develop the conditions in which social justice can be achieved through a language free from the tyranny of hegemonies of all kinds. (148)

As I have suggested throughout this chapter, we must concentrate our efforts on unraveling the many layers of culture if the social 'tyranny of hegemonies' is to ever topple. For Barthes, popular-culture was the perfect place to undertake such an operation; it served as a living record of the ideals a society internalized as unequivocal truths. For the purposes of this study, however, a work from the literary canon, from that which has been hailed by critics, historians and the general populace as important and extraordinary literary accomplishments, seems an appropriate cite for exploring the naturalization of disability myths. Such a text not only reaches a wider readership than non-canonical works, but in most cases acts as an accurate yardstick for gauging the collective spirit and tone of a culture. Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, one of the most popular American novels of all time, has been heralded for capturing – to paraphrase Wordsworth – the "breath and finer spirit" (259) of human existence. What its champions fail to investigate, however, is the extent to which Melville's text legitimates and, in turn, privileges the assumptions upon which disability myths are founded. Moreover, this palpable gap in the critical appraisal of the novel is of itself highly significant to the Barthean demythologist as it signals the presence of an uncontested certainty. It is to this canonical work, then, that we must now turn our attention.

CHAPTER 2: DISABILITY *MYTH* IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S *MOBY-DICK*

Scaling the Canon: The Critical Response to Melville's Moby-Dick

> "...**we see Melville casting to the winds all conventional restrictions and rioting in the prodigality of his imaginative vigor**".
>
> -- Henry S. Salt (1889)

Like so many canonized writers before and after him, Herman Melville never enjoyed financial success nor popular acclaim while living. His work failed to capture the attention of its original reviewers and intended reading public, and seemed destined to fade quietly into literary oblivion. It was not until 1919, the centennial year of his birth, that Melville's writings, particularly his three volume tour de force *Moby-Dick*, began to be celebrated in academic circles and championed by an enthusiastic readership. This 'Melville Revival' of the 1920s – a movement initiated primarily by John Masefield, H. M. Thomlinson, Henry S. Salt, T.E. Lawrence and Carl Van Dorn – propelled Melville into the literary spotlight, a spotlight that has since seldom waned in the arena of American Literature.

When faced with such a dramatic reversal in the critical acceptance of a work – it was some 75 years after its initial publication that *Moby-Dick* began to receive significant critical acclaim – we must, in the spirit of Barthean demythology, investigate the cultural variables responsible for facilitating such a change. [8] We must ask ourselves: *What cultural*

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[8] The constant shifts in popular taste as to what constitutes a 'great' work of literature lend support to the Barthean claim that canon formation is always subject to a myriad of cultural forces. Barthes and his contemporaries maintain that a work of literature *becomes* rather than *is* a 'classic'; its 'greatness' evolves in accordance with the ideologies and political interests of its time. For more on Barthes's ideas about

dynamics initiated ***Moby-Dick****'s inception into the American canon and the mainstream reading public?* Only when such a foundation is in place will we be able to formulate a comprehensive analysis of *how* and *why* Melville reproduces stereotypical representations of disability in his otherwise unconventional and non-conformist epic tale.

When Melville's *Moby-Dick* first appeared on the literary scene in the fall of 1851 its reviewers were extremely critical of its 'peculiar' style and unappealing thematic content. Melville's avant-guard synthesis of forms – his combination of high drama, verisimilitude, symbolism and soliloquy – was considered by reviewers an inappropriate and even blasphemous writing experiment. His compounded literary design was perceived as a conscious rejection of the accepted and, thus, 'supreme' conventions of his time, a willing revolt against the established tradition of shedding any and all things extravagant and/or 'unnecessary' from the literary narrative. The larger reading public, in turn, was discouraged from reading such an 'errant' creation, and Melville himself was branded a violator of his culture's naturalized standards of decency and morality. An 1851 review from the London *Spectator* voices the common criticism Melville's readers attributed to his unimpressive and impious 'Rhapsody Run Mad':

> The rhapsody belongs to wordmongering where ideas are the staple, where it takes the shape of narrative or dramatic fiction, it is phantasmal – an attempted description of what is impossible in nature and without probability in art; it repels the reader instead of attracting him. (quoted in Hayes 3)

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literature and literary theory see, in particular, *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), "The Death of the Author" (1968) and *S/Z* (1970).

An anonymous reporter from the London *Athenaeum* (1851) records a similar 'repulsion' to Melville's exorbitant methodology:

> The voice of 'the storm wind Eurocydon' must not be interrupted by the facts of Scoresby and the figures of Cocker. Ravings and scraps of useful knowledge flung together salad-wise make a dish in which there may be much surprise, but in which there is little savour. (quoted in Hayes xviii)

To his original critics, Melville's artistic vision was inherently flawed; its convoluted form, though unique, could in no way be reconciled with the conventional nineteenth-century literary emphasis on ordering the material world 'simply' and without decoration. Spanos, in his complex theoretical text *The Errant Art of* ***Moby-Dick***, summarizes the nature of the public's resistance to Melville's text:

> ...they read Melville's deliberately 'errant' text – the structural oscillation between the personal discourse of common sense or experiential verisimilitude and the more predominant 'eccentric' flights of imagination (which they reduced to 'Fancy') – as the manifestation of something between lunacy (possession) and blasphemy. (12-13)

With the advent of the 'Modernist' movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a movement characterized by drastic shifts in public mores and social codes, the traditional critical opinion surrounding Melville's text began to change. At this particularly unstable moment in human history, Melville's novel was interpreted *not* as a quasi-heretical exercise in self-aggrandizement but as an important and profound expression of the mutable spirit of humankind. Hayes, in the preface to his compilation of articles entitled *The Critical Response to Herman Melville's* ***Moby-Dick***, elaborates on this shift in critical perspective: "The darkness, destruction and undeniable sense of worldly evil brought about by the Great War made those qualities in *Moby-Dick* all the more pertinent

and understandable" (xxi). In the wake of the catastrophic events of the First World War, the once unshakable faith in the virtuosity of Western thought and civilization began to crumble. Beliefs which, at one time, provided a sense of permanence, stability, and confidence in human intimacy failed to account for the various instances of atrocity and mass destruction which characterized the early decades of the twentieth century. Within this disharmonious state, individuals were forced to consider the dire possibility that their lives lacked any centre of moral belief. This indeterminacy, in turn, fostered a skepticism about the adequacy of traditional literary modes. The previous emphasis on 'reasonable' and undecorated language, for instance, no longer seemed appropriate for representing the harsh and unstable reality of the post-World War I world. The modernist consciousness celebrated, instead, any and all forms of literary extravagance, and encouraged artists to take risks in the style, form and content of their art.

To this new generation of critics, the disjointed narrative pattern in Melville's *Moby-Dick* – its amalgamation of Shakespearean-esque soliloquies, melodrama and 'cetology' documentation – seemed an accurate and appropriate model for approximating the reckless and unstable state of modern 'Man'. While Melville's previous generation of reviewers criticized his conscious repudiation of the 'rules' of good writing, the modernists applauded him for rejecting static literary techniques and for seeking alternative modes of defining reality. T.S. Eliot, in his oft-quoted reaction to Joyce's ingenious incorporation of myth into the narrative form, proclaims that such unconventional techniques give "a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (483). Melville's adherence to an 'allegorical' formula and to the idea that

'meaning' could exist and be expressed outside the material form was also celebrated by the modernists as evidence of his anti-conformist leanings. Gleim, in his text *The Meaning of Moby Dick*, expands on the role Melville's artifice – his reliance on symbolic and allegorical patterns – plays in the overall design of the novel: "These parables are not merely incidental, as literary embellishments, in *Moby Dick*, for they constitute, rather, the main purpose for which the book was written. The whaling voyage is merely the carrier of a hidden collection of mystical topics" (8).

Despite the seemingly boundless interpretative possibilities these 'mystical topics' present to students and scholars of *Moby-Dick*, and Melville's deliberate rejection of the artistically stifling traditions of his time, one aspect of his text remains curiously static: its exploitative representations of disability. In his characterization of individuals with disabilities, Melville (and many of his critics) rely heavily on the traditional literary practice of using impairment as a metaphor for conveying a larger, more profound theoretical vision. His 'disabled' characters – for our purposes these include Ahab, Pip, Elijah, Gabriel and the nameless 'crippled' beggar – never escape the conventional 'types' they are cast into and, as such, degenerate into flat and contrived symbols rather than convincing characters with personalities and histories. This systematic objectification, moreover, perpetuates the assumption that individuals with disabilities are social deviants, mysterious 'others' who, strictly by virtue of their corporeal 'abnormalities,' lie beyond the boundaries of 'normal' humanity. Thus, although Melville rages against the conventions of his time – indeed, *Moby-Dick* is a bold expression of independence and originality in the face of an oppressive dominant culture – he nonetheless aligns himself with those very same forces via

his stereotypical representations of the 'disabled'. These representations, in turn, must be isolated and subsequently unraveled if we are to destabilize the hierarchical and biased assumptions upon which they are founded.

Understanding Ahab

> **"I know...that ever since he lost his leg last voyage by that accursed whale, he's been a kind of moody – desperate moody, and savage sometimes"**
>
> *Moby-Dick*, 177

Captain Ahab, arguably the most intriguing character in Melville's epic tale, has been the subject of scores of critical texts and scholarly articles since the 'Melville Revival' of the 1920s. Cast in a light of mystery and tragic grandeur, Ahab is one of the novel's greatest puzzles; his motivations and elemental composition are sources of constant speculation and investigation by imaginative readers and critics. Although interpretations of Ahab's character are as multifarious and disparate as interpretations of the novel itself, they tend to revolve around the following three poles: 1. that Ahab is a living emblem of pure Satanic evil, a fallen angel predestined to meet his horrific fate, 2. that Ahab is but a symbol of a larger trend in America whereby industry and the capitalist system it is born out of have quashed the once collective spirit of American democracy, and 3. that Ahab suffers from an all-encompassing sense of psychological inferiority, a deficiency which triggers his insatiable monomania.[9] The one constant in each of these speculative possibilities is that Ahab plays an essentially antagonistic role in the novel; he represents, as

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[9] Although these interpretations are among the more popular in studies of *Moby-Dick*, a number of critics choose to see Ahab as a tragic hero, a flawed but nonetheless courageous exemplar of the Emersonian principle of 'Self-Reliance'. For readings of this particular persuasion please see Mumford (1929), Murray (1951), Parke (1955) and Pease (1986).

Henry Nash Smith submits, "a number of wrong and dangerous attitudes" (24-25) to be scorned and avoided.

What draws the disability demythologist's attention is that in each of these popular interpretations of Captain Ahab his physical impairment is imbued with a certain symbolic weight; his lost leg becomes a metaphorical mystery to be untangled, a puzzle we must solve if we are to unravel the 'true' nature of his character. What follows is that Ahab cannot be understood unless in relation to his impairment; impairment is essence and personal biography – tastes, dreams, hopes and fears – inconsequential. Leonard Kriegel elaborates on how this assimilation of impairment and identity works in *Moby-Dick*:

> What we can say with surety is that the absent leg is Ahab's mark, the brand of his permanent insufficiency. Ahab cannot live with his ivory leg. Obviously, he cannot live without it either. His injury becomes his selfhood, and his selfhood is the leg ripped from him by Moby Dick. (34)

As we have already seen in Graham Greene's characterization of Deo Gratias and Shakespeare's Richard III, such static representations strip characters with disabilities of both personality and history. This formal objectification, in turn, renders them more of a hollow caricature than a fully developed and, thus, convincing character. More dangerously, however, this manipulation of the popular formula of impairment-as-symbol re-inscribes the notion that the 'disabled' possess some mythic sensibility, some exotic flavor that necessitates an abstract form of representation. Such portraits reiterate and police the seemingly unproblematic cultural assumption that impairment signals an innate abnormality, a constant and universal mark of the subhuman 'other'. This process of

'othering,' in turn, forces the objectified individuals to the margins of society where, because of the naturalized hierarchy of able-bodied over disabled, they are denied the right to both equal opportunity and self-definition. In order to combat the dehumanizing consequences of these discriminatory representations of disability, we must first attempt to pin-point their origin in Melville's text. A brief examination of the three conventional interpretations of Ahab's character seems an appropriate point of departure for this particular investigation.

Ahab-as-Devil

This lovely light, it lights not me.

Moby-Dick, **216**

Perhaps the most common interpretation of the 'meaning' of Ahab's character involves the idea that he represents the 'dark' side of humanity, the purely evil aspect of the human subconscious obsessed with terror and pain. J.C. Squire, in his 1922 review "The Crown of Melville's Artistic Achievement," was one of the first to formulate this particular reading:

> Again and again the theme is directly and openly returned to; the eternal problem of evil is posed in all its manifestations; sentences and pages are written which momentarily open black abysses of despair or present to the mind with irresistible force pictures of nightmare horror. (179)

In the novel, Ahab's affinity to a Christian version of Satan first surfaces by way of a biblical allusion to King Ahab of the Old Testament. Peleg, one of the *Pequod's* owners, initiates this parallel:

> He's a grand, ungodly, god-like man...Ahab's been in colleges, as well as 'mong the cannibals; been used to deeper wonders than the waves; fixed his fiery lance in mightier, stranger foes than whales...Oh! He ain't Captain Bildad; no, and he ain't Captain Peleg; *he's Ahab*, boy; and Ahab of old, thou knowest, was a crowned king! (176)

King Ahab, notorious for his murderous and diabolical reign, is, as Ishmael proceeds to note, an enemy of Israel, a man who, because of his cruel and merciless misdeeds, was murdered and left to feast upon by vicious dogs. Like his biblical namesake, Ahab, a tyrant who, throughout his three year voyage, renounces the spirit of forgiveness and brotherly love Christianity so emphatically champions, is subject to a similarly horrific fate. By the novel's conclusion, for instance, Ahab's lifeless body is made bait for the thousands of sharks feasting "smackingly" (398) upon it. In keeping with this biblical analogy, the sagacious prophet Elijah is also resurrected in Melville's drama and, like his biblical predecessor, possesses the prescient power to predict the death of "black terrific Ahab" (248).

Coupled with these biblical allusions identifying Ahab as an enemy of Israel is a barrage of images of darkness, images which have, throughout the history of literature, functioned to connote evil and vice. Throughout *Moby-Dick,* Melville consistently casts Ahab in an atmosphere of dusk and gloom; shadows often hide his "tawny scorched face" (218) and the dark nights on board the ship's deck successfully mask his 'ungodly' figure. Ahab, himself, appropriates this imagery to describe his 'fallen' state of existence:

> Oh, thou clear spirit, of thy fire thou madest me, and like a true child of fire, I breathe it back to thee....Yet blindfold, yet will I talk to thee. Light though thou be, thou leapest out of darkness; but I am darkness leaping out of light, leaping out of thee! (616-617)

Like Lucifer, the fallen angel said to be born out of darkness rather than light, Ahab reconciles himself to the fact that he is destined to live in a state of eternal damnation. Accordingly, he vows to summon forth, from the deepest and darkest recesses of his subconscious, any and all nascent forces of hate and malevolence, forces which will expedite his quest for vengeance.

Ahab's conscious rejection of this guiding light of religious faith, this ethereal force which leads the virtuous upwards to eternal salvation, manifests itself in the three pagan rituals he and his crew co-opt aboard the *Pequod*. In each of these observances, fire rather than water is the baptismal potion of choice and harpoons, instruments of death and destruction, the crosses upon which the worshipers venerate. In the first of what Henry A. Murray, in his celebrated essay "In Nomine Diaboli," describes as a "frenzied ceremony...suggestive of the Black Mass" (412-413), Ahab parodies the Christian sacrament of 'Communion' by pouring a fiery drink into the inverted ends of his harpooners' weapons. From these "murderous chalices" (265) Ahab orders his disciples to

> drink and swear, ye men that man the deathful whaleboat's bow - Death to Moby Dick! God hunt us all, if we do not hunt Moby Dick to his death!' The long, barbed steel goblets were lifted; and to cries and maledictions against the white whale, the spirits were simultaneously quaffed down with a hiss...Once more, and finally, the replenished pewter went the round among the frantic crew... (265)

In the second satanic rite of passage – a scene which, in its claustrophobic and foreboding atmosphere, burns with the literary intensity of both Poe and Hawthorne – Ahab baptizes his harpoon in the name of Lucifer: "Ego, non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!" (600). This wretched ejaculation is matched in 'The Candles' chapter wherein Ahab and his followers participate in the novel's third and final satanic ritual. Ahab,

standing before a "tripointed trinity of flames" (616) – again, an inverted image of a 'divinely' sanctioned Christian icon – aligns himself with the spirit of rage latent in his "fiery father" (617) of evil and destruction:

> Through thee, thy flaming self, my scorched eyes do dimly see it. Oh, thou foundling fire, thou hermit immemorial, thou too has thy incommunicable riddle, thy unparticipated grief. Here again with haughty agony, I read my sire. Leap! leap up, and lick the sky! I leap with thee; I burn with thee; would fain be welded with thee, defyingly I worship thee! (617)

In this final 'unholy' homily – a particularly horrific moment that resembles, as Murray states, "a scene out of hell" (412-413) – Ahab again adorns the mantle of the anti-Christ.

In addition to this conventional reading of Ahab as an archetypal emblem of evil is the popular critical assertion that Melville's lurid captain is patterned on Milton's poetic vision of Satan. Murray submits, for instance:

> There is some evidence that Melville was re-reading *Paradise Lost* in the summer of 1850, shortly after, let us guess, he got the idea of transforming the captain of his whale-ship into the first of all cardinal sinners who fell by pride. (413)

This correlation between Milton's fallen angel and Melville's vile captain manifests itself most explicitly in their collective rejection of heavenly pursuits and unquenchable desire for vengeance. Ahab, in a speech reminiscent of the first book of *Paradise Lost* wherein Satan muses over his dejected condition and the means through which he can initiate his revenge, is equally contemplative of his fallen state:

> Damned in the midst of Paradise!...They think me mad – Starbuck does; but I'm demoniac, I am madness maddened! That wild madness that's only calm to comprehend itself! The prophecy was that I should be dismembered; and - Aye! I lost this leg. I now prophesy that I will dismembered my dismemberer...(216)

Like Satan, Ahab's tragic flaw resides in his arrogance, his vain belief that he is somehow more mighty and powerful than the seemingly immortal white whale and all it represents.[10] His willing destruction of the ship's quadrant, for instance, evinces his fallacious belief in the infallibility of his own will. This incorrigible sense of self-satisfaction is revisited in a later chapter entitled 'The Needle' wherein Melville's imperious captain declares and, subsequently, celebrates his own divinity. After realigning the ship's compass, Ahab egotistically proclaims to his crew: "Look ye, for yourselves, if Ahab be not *lord of the level lodestone*! The sun is East, and that compass swears it!" (628 my emphasis). Ever conscious of the significance of such utterances, Ishmael, the sensible and judicious voice of Melville's narrative, comments on his captain's tragic flaw: "In his fiery eyes of scorn and triumph, you then saw Ahab in all his fatal pride" (628). Thus, like Milton's fallen angel, Ahab is a tragic but false hero, a villainous tyrant unable to see beyond the scope of his own monologic vision.

Working in metaphoric tandem with these and other archetypal representations of 'Ahab-as-evil' is Melville's reproduction of the pre-established Judeo-Christian notion that one's "crippled" (222) body is an accurate indicator of one's inherent depravity of spirit. The first full description we get of Ahab actualizes the extent to which Melville relies on this popular formula of 'impairment-equals-evil':

> He looked like a man cut away from the stake, when the fire has overrunningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them, or taking away one particle from

[10] For many, Moby-Dick represents a chilling image of 'fate,' a symbolic embodiment of the metaphysical forces of predestination. *Moby-Dick,* in turn, is interpreted as a commentary on the futility of raging against one's mortality, of attempting to escape the inescapable. See Murray (1951), Parke (1955), Gleim (1962), Fussell (1965) and Adamson (1997) for thought provoking inquiries into the symbolic nature of Melville's white whale.

> their compacted aged robustness...Threading its way out from among his grey hairs, and continuing right down one side of his tawny scorched face and neck, till it disappeared in his clothing, you saw a slender rod-like mark, lividly whitish...So powerfully did the whole grim aspect of Ahab effect me, and the livid brand which streaked it, that for the first few moments *I hardly noted that not a little of this overbearing grimness was owing to the barbaric white leg upon which he partly stood.* (218-219 my emphasis)

In this extended description of Ahab's physical appearance, Ishmael deliberately emphasizes how his captain's vivid scar and *barbaric* ivory leg account for the 'grim' and ominous atmosphere he exudes. Implicit in this description is the notion that Ahab's impairment is tantamount to his malicious persona; his 'twisted body' signals the presence of his 'twisted soul'. This dramatic fusion of body and soul has its roots in the biblical assertion that impairment and, more specifically, 'crippleness' are the marks of the devil, the material emblems of evil working within the human form.[11] To briefly reiterate Michael Oliver's analysis of the history of disability, societies founded on religious or spiritual guidelines tend to perceive physical and mental impairments as the material presence of a diabolical and evil force or as punishments for previous sins against God. These assumptions are grounded in the Old Testament avowal that the body is a living temple of God, a vessel in which faith and inner-strength are housed. If, by turns, the corporeal body is considered to be 'broken' or 'deformed' – as Ahab's is by his crew – the implication that follows is that the 'holy' spirit of forgiveness and righteousness dwells beyond its boundaries. For Melville's nineteenth-century reader, a reader heavily ingrained in Judeo-

[11] "Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town. Some men brought him a paralytic, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Take heart, son; your *sins* are forgiven.'...Then he said to the paralytic, 'Get up, take your mat and go home,' And the man got up and went home. When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given

Christian thought and ethics, the significance of Ahab's impairment is seldom missed. Ahab's flawed physicality is understood immediately as a sign of his allegiance to a darker power and as a symbol of his inherent spiritual deprivation. On the off-chance that his reader is unfamiliar with this biblical conviction, Melville reaffirms its message via the omnipresent Ishmael:

> *Real* strength never impairs beauty or harmony, but it often bestows it; and in everything imposingly beautiful, strength has much to do with the magic. Take away the tied tendons that all over seem bursting from the marble in the carved Hercules, and its charm would be gone. As devout Eckerman lifted the linen sheet from the naked corpse of Goethe, he was overwhelmed with the massive chest of the man, that seemed as a Roman triumphal arch. *When Angelo paints even God the Father in human form, mark what robustness is there*. (484 my emphasis)

By consistently juxtaposing the virtuous Starbuck with the vainglorious and cruel Captain Ahab – two opposing poles of the normal/abnormal corporeal spectrum and, by extension, the dichotomy between good and evil – Melville further mobilizes this metaphor. Unlike Ahab, whose flawed corporeality signifies his absence of faith and human compassion, Starbuck's "pure tight skin...embalmed with *inner health and strength*" (209 my emphasis) matches the purity of his Christian soul and the strength of his just and harmonious will. Moreover, where Ahab's 'freakish' appearance renders him a specter of darkness and despair, a barbarous betrayer of the perfect image of God, Starbuck's 'sound' body indicates his sense and security, his "staid, steadfast" (210) commitment to all that is virtuous and just. In both representations, Melville reproduces the already popular

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such authority to men" (Matthew 9:1-9). See also Matthew 8:1-4, Mark 1:40-44, 2: 1-12, Luke 5:12-14 and 13: 11-13.

assumption that the physical body is a transparent testament to one's internal worth or non-worth.

Melville's utilization of this particular metaphor evinces his willing appropriation of a number of stereotypical and, thus, injurious assumptions about individuals with disabilities. By reproducing the biblical conception of disability – the mythic idea that an impairment is the mark of evil, a badge worn on the material form of an enemy of God – Melville legitimizes the naturalized 'individual model' of disability and its presupposition that the 'disabled' are inherent deviants of the established realm of normality and, by turns, morality. The deliberate equating of impairment with evil which surfaces repeatedly in Melville's characterization of Ahab, reiterates the culturally-fixed idea that people with disabilities are unnatural 'others' to be feared and/or eliminated, villainous and uncivilized traitors of everything beautiful and holy. When disability and evil become interchangeable entities, individuals with disabilities are automatically denied both the human right to equality and the freedom of self-definition. As deviants of the naturalized moral coda, they immediately become objects of fear and anxiety, objects which invite if not deserve unequal treatment. Moreover, because their deviations from the 'normal' corporeal form are interpreted as accurate indicators of their moral inequity and social non-worth, the dominant power (the able-bodied majority) feels justified in exercising control over their aberrant bodies. This control often manifests itself in the forms of institutionalization and segregation, practices which, in both cases, function to supervise the betrayers of normality and to insure their subservience to a noble, more civilized social body. Thus, when disability and evil become synonymous, individuals with disabilities are denied the ability to

pave their own destinies and to dictate the terms of their own personas; more dangerously, however, this process of self-definition is usurped by an external force, a force which possesses the unbridled power to dictate the fate of those it defines. [12]

* * *

By way of a brief aside, the Barthean demythologist cannot help but notice that Melville introduces a similarly stigmatizing and detrimental image of the evil 'other' into his characterization of Fedallah. In his portrait of Fedallah as a shrewd and vile disciple of the Zoroastrian clan, Melville essentially reproduces an 'Orientalist' discourse, a discourse patterned on the West's erroneous and, by turns, injurious conception of 'Asian-as-other'. Edward Said, in his highly influential 1978 text *Orientalism*, defines this pattern of exploitation as follows:

> [Orientalism is] a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident." Thus a very large mass of writers, among who are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind," destiny, and so on. (3)

In his characterization of Fedallah as sub-human, as a dark and terrifying phantom – an image he similarly reserves for Ahab and other members of his 'disabled' cast of characters – Melville re-inscribes the primary assumptions characterizing the Western conception of the 'Orient'. He reproduces, for instance, the Orientalist notion that individuals of Asian descent are inherently mysterious and secretive, curious specters imbued with prescient,

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[12] Once again, one need only recall the horrendous atrocities suffered by individuals with disabilities during the Nazi Eugenics movement of the Second World War for an example of how the idea of 'disability-equals-evil' incites violence and mistreatment.

preternatural powers. To the members aboard the *Pequod*, the phantasmagoric Fedallah seems a servant to a darker more ominous force:

> He was such a *creature as civilized, domestic people in the temperate zone only see in their dreams, and that but dimly*; but the life of whom now and then glide among the unchanging Asiatic communities, especially the Oriental isles to the east of the continent – those insulated, immemorial, unalterable countries, which even in these modern days still preserve most of the ghostly aboriginalness of earth's primal generations... (333-334 my emphasis)

Fedallah's affinity with the 'ghostly aboriginalness of earth's primal generations' intimates that he is more a spirit than a man, a devilish being resurrected from the depths of Hades to assist the equally horrific and ambiguous Ahab in his monomaniacal quest.

Perhaps the most incriminating piece of evidence implicating Melville in a scheme of Orientalist discourse is the total omission of any and all elements of Fedallah's personality and history from his method of characterization. Fedallah exists not as a developed character, but as an entirely symbolic entity; the contents of his personality are perpetually shielded from the reader and supplanted instead with incessant references to his likeness to and affinity with the darker forces of the universe. Kerry McSweeney substantiates this reading by arguing that Fedallah's characterization is merely a "fuzzy symbolic overlay that supplies one pole – the dark, evil one – toward which Ahab is shown to be drawn in" (77-78). Implicit in this flat and undeveloped characterization is the idea that Fedallah, simply by virtue of his ethnicity and appearance, evades conventional representation; like the 'crippled' Captain Ahab, Fedallah cannot be articulated or understood as anything but the exotic 'other,' the ominous and evasive shadow positioned just beyond the borders of humanity. Seeped in colonial, racist and ethnocentric ideals, this

stereotypical image of the mysterious 'savage' of Western fantasies ostensibly 'others' and, hence, objectifies the Asian subject. Moreover, much like the representations of disability found in the text, Melville's portrait of Fedallah-as-other operates on an entirely mythic (yet, nonetheless, socially accredited) image of 'normal' humanity, an image *created* and *policed* by the purveyors of the normative corporeal body. Thus, Melville, in his characterization of Fedallah, non-apologetically reproduces his culture's homogenizing myths of racial superiority, myths which encourage the subjugation and suppression of members of the 'barbaric' and 'backward' Eastern populace.

Ahab-as-Tyrant

Interestingly, political interpretations of Ahab's character (to return, once again, to my original site of investigation) focus *not* on the novel's language of 'barbarism', but on its language of advanced technology.[13] Ahab, when examined through this particular critical lens, comes to represent America at its worst, a nation which, preoccupied by the growing forces of industry and economic competition, lost sight of its democratic foundation. Captain Ahab, the leader of what Gardner describes as the "American ship of state" (9), is perceived as an exemplar of the totalitarian forces of capitalism and industry; he alone dictates the terms of the *Pequod's* voyage, and in this autocratic role comes to represent what Bainard Cowan calls "the downfall, however magnificent, of the masters at the helm of a machinelike civilization" (9). To relay this particular sensibility, Melville incorporates a series of 'industrial' and 'mechanical' images into his characterization of

[13] For interesting examinations of the political significance of Ahab's character please see Matthiessen (1941), Chase (1957), Fussell (1965), Niemeyer (1994) and Spanos (1995).

Ahab. His narrator contends, for instance, that Ahab's voice produces "a sound so strangely muffled and inarticulate that it seemed the *mechanical humming* of the *wheels* of his vitality in him" (my emphasis 259). The Captain's eyes, moreover, glow like "coals" (650), the very fuel that generates the industrial machine. A similarly striking image Melville employs to signal Ahab's affiliation with the industrial forces of his time is that of the railroad, the quintessential icon of nineteenth-century commercial expansion. Ahab, in one of his many soliloquies, mobilizes this metaphor:

> The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run. Over unsounded gorges, through the rifled hearts of mountains, under torrents' beds, unerringly I rush! Naught's an obstacle, naught's an angle to the iron way! (266)

What catches the disability theorist's eye, in particular, is that such political interpretations of the novel place a similar emphasis on the symbolic significance of Ahab's lost leg. Just as Richard's 'hunchback' denoted the dejected state of England before the establishment of the divinely-sanctioned Tudor dynasty, Ahab's amputated leg intimates a deficiency in nineteenth-century American culture, an absence that subsequently spawned an ungodly tyrannical force into a privileged seat of power. Ahab's 'deformed' frame becomes a microcosmic example of an American social body corrupted by the unbridled forces of capitalism, a broken and unsteady order lacking its essential democratic *footing*. Moreover, the ivory leg substituted in its place – ivory, we must remember, is a quintessential colonial trope – becomes an emblem not only of an oppressive system of governance but of an unnatural and, thus, noxious social entity, a mismated and incongruous piece in an otherwise completed puzzle.

This symbolic patterning, though resourceful and unique, implicates Melville and those critics who champion this particular reading of his text in a scheme of reproducing and, thus, legitimating popular disability myths. By presenting Ahab's 'unbalanced' corporeal form as the symbolic manifestation of the unsound principles guiding his totalitarian convictions, both Melville and his critics reproduce the assumption that impairments are the natural material symptoms of an individual's internal composition, the key to the soul's design. This equating of the 'unsound' body and the 'unsound' soul reproduces and reinforces, as Paul Longmore submits, the mythic ideas that "disability is a punishment for evil; disabled people are embittered by their "fate"; disabled people resent the nondisabled and would, if they could, destroy them" (67). For individuals with disabilities, the repercussions of this stigmatization are twofold: 1. they are unable to cast off the cloak of villainy attached to their impairments and 2. as unwanted and repugnant 'others' they are ostracized and relegated to the far margins of the social order where they must spend their lives subjected to the dehumanizing glares and discriminatory practices of their able-bodied nemeses. This parallel, moreover, reiterates the notion that an individual's impairment and *not* the multifarious elements that comprise his/her personality is the defining feature of his/her selfhood, the proverbial window to an otherwise concealed identity.

Ahab-as-Psychological Case Study

Psychological interpretations of Melville's text tend to place a similar emphasis on the symbolic 'meaning' of Ahab's impairment. In most instances, these readings reflect the assumption that Ahab's amputated leg is the very source of his psychic insufficiency, the

mainspring of his unbalanced ego. [14] Ahab's absence of flesh and bone, an incompleteness he begs the ship's carpenter to "drive...away" (582) with a new ivory leg, is interpreted as a psychologically devastating yet ever-present reminder of his inferiority, a permanent brand of his inadequacy. What follows from this particular assessment is that Ahab, unable to cope with his impairment and with the changes it brings to his daily routines and social relationships, denounces his 'sense' and power of reason, and embarks, instead, on a voracious and monomaniacal quest for vengeance.

Images of Ahab as a maladjusted victim of circumstance, a self-pitying "lubber" (261) psychologically emasculated by the diabolical white whale, abound in Melville's text. Ahab, himself, (although seemingly unaware of his 'inferiority' complex) offers the first extended description of his motivation for pursuing the enigmatic Moby-Dick:

> ...it was Moby Dick that dismasted me; Moby Dick that brought me to this dead stump I stand on now. Aye, aye...It was that accursed white whale that razeed me; made a poor pegging lubber of me for ever and a day!'... 'Aye, aye! And I'll chase him round Good Hope, and round the Horn, and round the Norway Maelstron, and round perditions' flames before I give him up. (261)

Ishmael, a character Melville endows with an almost omniscient awareness of the psychological composition of his shipmates, seems capable of penetrating the very source of Ahab's rage. In the chapter entitled "Moby Dick," for instance, Ishmael reveals the forces driving his Captain's unfettered monomania:

> ...ever since that almost fatal encounter, Ahab had cherished a wild vindictiveness against the whale, all the more fell for that in his frantic morbidness he at last came to identify with him, not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation

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[14] For critical readings echoing this particular *modus operandi*, please see Durand (1981), Cameron (1981) and Adamson (1997).

> of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them...He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it. (283)

What these and similar passages emphasize is that the state of Ahab's psychological composition is entirely contingent upon his corporeality; his material absence, in other words, triggers the collapse of his mental and emotional faculties.

To further illuminate the nature and extent of Ahab's psychological trauma, Melville introduces, at various moments in the text, the image of a sailor standing erect aboard his sailing vessel. From this image, Melville intimates that one's ability to 'maintain one's legs' in the face of external impediments is a sign of one's internal dignity and worth. "It would never do" says Ishmael, "for [a] straddling captain to be seen steadying himself the slightest particle by catching hold of anything with his hands" (344). A sailor's ability to stand erect is also presented in the novel as a visible indication of his stable and harmonious state of mind, his 'sound' and steadfast soul. Accordingly, if an individual is distressed, as Stubb appears to be upon finding himself in the presence of the foreboding Captain Ahab, his anxiety manifests itself in an inability to maintain his upright posture. Stubb actualizes this metaphor in the following terms: "What the devil's the matter with me? I don't stand right on my legs. Coming afoul of that old man has a sort of turned me wrong side out" (224). Bearing this and similar metaphors in mind, the psychological reader proceeds to submit that Ahab's inability to stand 'right' on his own legs – an action which connotes both courage and confidence – provokes his unabated sense of inadequacy. Unable to balance his frame by his own will, Ahab feels stripped of dignity and respect,

forever emasculated in an unequivocally 'masculine' world. His "mutilated body" submits Joseph Adamson, in his text *Melville, Shame and the Evil Eye*, "reminds him that without others he is as helpless as an infant" (89). What follows from this reading is that Ahab, in an effort to pacify his all-encompassing sense of inferiority and incapacitating void, resorts to violence and rage. Adamson traces this pattern as follows:

> The experience described...is clearly analogous to "the quintessential reaction to the sense of helplessness in the face of the experience of selfobject failure" (Bacal 1990, 236). Such a feeling is so intolerable that it is "quickly erased from consciousness and, at the same time, trigger[s] the expression of narcissistic rage at the offending object."...it is the feeling of helplessness in the face of his plight, and of the accompanying undischarged anger directed at himself, that is at the heart of Ahab's deep inner sadness. (76)

In this and similar interpretations of the internal workings of Ahab's psyche, impairment is seen as the prime source of his inner turmoil, the root of his unbalanced mental state.

At the core of these psychological interpretations of Ahab's character lies the mythic (yet culturally accepted) assumption that disability is an issue of *emotional coping*, an internal quandary that must be 'worked through' and mastered if an individual is to regain self-confidence and to enjoy the everyday processes of living. The implication that follows is that individuals with impairments need only come to terms with their disabled 'fate' if they want to be granted unconditional access into the social arena. Paul Longmore elaborates on the nature of such psychological interpretations:

> [Such interpretations reflect the idea that] disability is a problem of emotional coping, of personal acceptance. It is not a problem of social stigma and discrimination. It is a matter of individuals overcoming not only the physical impairments of their own bodies but more importantly the emotional consequences of such impairments...they convey the message that success or failure in living with a disability results almost solely from the emotional choices, courage, and character of the individual. (72)

What is intrinsically problematic about this particular interpretation of Melville's text is its unconditional reliance on the medical/clinical assertion that disability is a fundamental bodily lack, an *inherent* human flaw. The psychological reader, for instance, basis his/her analysis on the erroneous assumption that disability is, to borrow Oliver's phrase, an instance of '*personal* tragedy,' a "terrible chance event which occurs at random to unfortunate individuals" (32). This emphasis on the 'personal' rather than 'social' experience of disability fails to take into account the extent to which individuals with impairments are excluded from participating in various aspects of mainstream social life. Such readings fail, moreover, to consider the fact that individuals with impairments are 'disabled' *not* by their corporeal 'defects' but by the attitudes and actions of an exclusionary majority. Hence, these essentially verbatim reiterations of the 'individual model' of disability fail to see beyond the scope of their own rigid visions; they fail to recognize that individuals with impairments have been and continue to be subjected to various forms of public humiliation and physical injury at the hands of a prejudicial and stigmatizing able-bodied majority, a majority which views their impairments as natural marks of the 'other,' labels worn on the frames of sinful betrayers of the divinely-sanctioned 'normal' body. This failure to explore the social dimensions of Ahab's trauma constitutes a shortcoming in conventional psychological interpretations of Melville's text. More dangerously, however, this particular type of reading, in its emphasis on the 'personal tragedy' aspect of Ahab's disability, legitimates and reinforces the already privileged position of disability myth in the social consciousness.

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The one constant threaded throughout each of these popular interpretations of Ahab's character is the idea that his impairment, his amputated leg, symbolizes a larger, more profound, theoretical concept. Although the significance of the missing leg varies from perspective to perspective – it reflects, for different critics, Ahab's affiliation with a darker spiritual force or his willing rejection of a *balanced* democratic social order or the source of his psychological deficiency – what remains uniform in each of these interpretative possibilities is the notion that Ahab cannot be fully understood unless in relation to his impairment. His impairment is his selfhood, the very core of his persona. The disability demythologist recognizes this equating of body and soul, of the idea that the 'twisted' corporeal form is somehow emblematic of one's 'twisted' internal composition, as the principal obstacle barring the cultural acceptance of the social model of disability. That Ahab can be understood only as 'Ahab-the-Cripple' signals the presence of the individual model of disability and its naturalized assertion that impairment is the mark of the abnormal 'other,' the innate symbol of one's flight from the borders of normality. Consequently, the 'disabled' – those individuals on the losing side of wholly arbitrary scales of strength, beauty and health – are pushed to the margins of society where they are denied both the human freedom to define their own identities and the human right to enjoy the same opportunities and privileges as their able-bodied counterparts.

Understanding Pip

In Melville's characterization of Pip, the innocent and virtuous 'lunatic' both protected and pitied by the *Pequod's* crew, impairment is, once again, charged with a certain symbolic weight. For instance, Pip, simply by virtue of his 'madness,' is granted unconditional access into the very hearts and minds of his fellow shipmates. His super-natural powers, moreover, are accompanied with an uncanny knowledge of the *unknown*, a prescient power to see into the intricate workings of the future. Ishmael, Melville's astute and 'reliable' narrator, intimates that Pip's descent into madness began when, alone in the infinite grandeur of the sea, he became overwhelmed by an unrelenting sense of isolation and abandonment. Adrift and at the mercy of the elements, Pip experiences an all-encompassing sense of hopeless desolation, a painful emotional state which, despite his being rescued from the depths of the sea's "heartless immensity" (545), is forever ingrained in his consciousness. In the chapter entitled "The Castaway," Ishmael describes the events leading to this mental degeneration:

> Out of the centre of the sea, poor Pip turned his crisp, curling, black head to the sun, another lonely castaway, though the loftiest and the brightest...The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God! who can tell it?...By the merest chance the ship itself at last rescued him; but from that hour the little negro went about the deck an idiot; such, at least, they said he was. The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. (525)

From this moment on, the once jovial Pip retires from playing his tambourine and takes up, instead, the popular literary role of the wise fool, the sagacious 'idiot' capable of seeing beyond the veil of false appearances. Ishmael, in keeping to this popular formula for the 'mad prophet,' elaborates on the nature of Pip's genius:

> [Pip was] carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it... (525)

In this account of Pip's mysterious powers of perception, Ishmael essentially proposes that the young boat-boy, alone in the utterly boundless orbit of the natural world, glimpsed, if only for a moment, the forces behind its control. Thus, it appears that Pip, as Bainard Cowan submits, "has looked into the heart of the mysteries of nature and been 'converted'" (158).

This image of the 'mad prophet' is revisited in Melville's characterization of two similarly 'deranged' characters: Elijah and Gabriel. Elijah, the sage seer resurrected from the Old Testament to re-play his role as Ahab's accuser, is, like Pip, "a little damaged in the head" (190). Just as Pip's madness triggers his innate telepathic sensibilities, Elijah too, in his insanity, penetrates what Matthiessen calls the "heavenly mysteries" (289) of the natural world. Upon encountering Ishmael and Queequeg, for instance, Elijah relates an ominous message alluding to the tragic fate of the *Pequod* and its crew: "Good-bye to ye. Shan't see ye again very soon, I guess; unless it's before the Grand Jury" (195). This power of prescience belongs also to Gabriel, another of Melville's 'lunatics' capable of seeing beyond the curtain of material reality. When given a letter to forward to one of the men who had perished in the wake of Moby Dick's wrath, Gabriel prophetically tells Ahab: "Nay, keep it thyself....thou art soon going that way" (424).

In his characterizations of Pip, Elijah and Gabriel, Melville evinces his fondness for the conventional literary technique of linking disability with super-ability. This dramatic manipulation of 'oxymoron,' of the idea that an individual can be simultaneously mad *and* wise, is used by Melville to heighten the reading experience; it casts a cloak of suspense and mystery over common perceptions of reality and signals to the reader the idea that some experiences lie beyond the seemingly limitless scope of human understanding. What Melville fails to take into account, however, is that in employing this seemingly *liberating* literary device, this explicit attack at conventional wisdom, he reproduces and, in turn, re-inscribes stereotypical assumptions about individuals with disabilities. By equating their impairment with their hyper-human abilities – the idea that their 'madness' is the source of their precocity, the seal of their abnormal genius – Melville reiterates the fallacious notion that individuals with disabilities are inherently different from their able-bodied counterparts. Moreover, by placing emphasis on the madness of Pip, Elijah and Gabriel and the subsequent *gift* of prescient powers that accompanies it, Melville reproduces the assumption that impairments are unnatural human characteristics, mysterious qualities which, when worn on the human body, automatically revoke one's membership from the normal and, by turns, superior spheres of society. This exoticized mode of characterization has its foundation in the naturalized 'normal/abnormal' binary in place in society and its tacit presupposition that those who deviate from its psychological, physical or emotional norms lie beyond the boundaries of humanity. Consequently, this mythical 'we-they' system of opposition (and its naturalized hierarchy of able-bodied over disabled) galvanizes

and, in many cases, rewards the inequitable treatment of those who deviate from the culturally-fixed corporeal norms.

Pip-as-Charity Cripple

Unlike Ahab, the 'Demonic Cripple' bent on destroying all who deter his monomaniacal mission, Pip inhabits the very opposite pole of the disability representation spectrum. As – to borrow Leonard Kriegel's phrase – the quintessential 'Charity Cripple,' Pip is neither feared nor loathed; he exists, instead, as an object of pity, a blameless victim of circumstance whose impairment inspires both benevolence and compassion from all he encounters. The Charity Cripple, in Kriegel's words, "plays with the heartstrings of his world...his goodness is the direct result of his having been cheated by Nature" (18). Pip, indeed, plays upon the heartstrings of both his shipmates and the reader in general; he is a character we embrace and want to protect, a downtrodden soul we pity and champion because of his hapless and ill-fated predicament. Like his guardian Ahab, we too want to help the helpless Pip, to comfort him in his insane delusions and to save his "holiness" (637) from those who would exploit or harm him.

For the disability demythologist, however, Pip's appeal resembles, to a striking degree, the appeal a charity 'poster child' has on its targeted donors. The poster child – a child often chosen on account of his/her 'pathetic' and/or 'feeble' appearance – engages the public's attention and affection *not* as a fellow human being in need of assistance but as an object of pity, a helpless (and, most often, nameless) creature in need of rescue by a virtuous and upright alms giver. This manipulation of what David Hevey describes as the "subhuman-dependency victim image" (25), an image of a weak and clinging 'invalid'

unable to survive without external support, is at the heart of most charity advertisements.[15] The 'crippled beggar' of Melville's story, the broken and dispirited 'amputee' intent on proving his inherent 'worthiness' for charitable support, also bears a likeness to this image of the charity cripple:

> On Tower-hill, as you go down to the London docks, you may have seen a crippled beggar (or *kedger*, as the sailors say) holding a painted board before him, representing the tragic scene in which he lost his leg. There are three whales and three boats; and one of the boats (presumed to contain the missing leg in all its original integrity) is being crunched by the jaws of the foremost whale. Any time these ten years, they tell me, has that man held up that picture, and exhibited that stump to an incredulous world. But the time of his justification has now come. His three whales are as good whales as were ever published in Wapping, at any rate; and his stump as unquestionable a stump as any you will find in the western clearings. But, though for ever mounted on that stump, never a stump-speech does the poor whaleman make; but, with downcast eyes, stands ruefully contemplating his own amputation. (376)

By displaying a picture of the tragic scene of his amputation, the beggar attempts to legitimate his 'need' for public charity. His 'downcast eyes,' moreover, render him helpless and impotent – the qualities necessary to prove one's rightful claim to charitable gifts.

What these images of the charity cripple disguise, however, is the extent to which they prey on the essentially opportunistic agendas of the 'pityer,' the individual moved to 'give' his/her share to the tragic victims of a hostile fate. Its image, a living portrait of dependence and helplessness, functions as a vehicle through which the able-bodied onlooker can actualize his/her own need for self-assurance, a need to see him/herself in a light of 'goodness' and morality. In simpler terms, the 'giver' gives on self-indulgent rather than altruistic grounds, grounds which facilitate the opportunity to see him/herself as

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[15] For critical analyses of the function and impact of charities and charity advertising, please see Hevey

generous and noble. Bickenbach, in his study *Physical Disability and Social Policy*, traces this equating of charity and virtuousness to the Christian tradition. According to Bickenbach, Jesus' teachings often revolved around the idea that one's benevolent gesture to "the downtrodden and *pauperes Christi*" (193) matched, in its selflessness, the will of the Holy Spirit and, by extension, God.[16] Charities, in turn, reproduce this particular formula in their campaigns; they present individuals with disabilities as downtrodden and weak, helpless but worthy sufferers in need of salvation from the gracious, god-like donor. In his article "The Wolf in the Pit in the Zoo," Leonard Kriegel describes how charities capitalize on the egoistic nature of their targeted donor:

> [the] chief function [of the Charity Cripple] is to perpetuate in his audience the illusion of its own goodness. One encounters the Charity Cripple without risking anything of one's own substance. (18)

By presenting extremely demeaning images of his characters with disabilities, images which equate disability with a helpless, infantile condition, Melville, like the charities he patterns his methods of characterization on, hopes to elicit pity and sympathy from his captivated audience. The images he employs, however, typically reinforce the myth that the 'disabled' are inherently weak and regressive. His characterizations of Pip and the nameless 'crippled beggar,' in particular, cast individuals with disabilities as utterly *dependent* on the charitable sympathies of others, and in doing so, re-inscribe the conventional belief that the 'disabled' are essentially inferior and subordinate to the able-bodied community. This hierarchy of the superior 'giver' over the inferior 'receiver' – a

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(1992), Wang (1992), Bickenbach (1993) and Shakespeare (1994).

relationship which, in its emphasis on the *intrinsic* worth or non-worth of human subjects, resembles the driving forces of colonialism – strips the subordinate bodies of both agency and human dignity. Bickenbach expands on the nature of this hierarchical relationship:

> Since a recipient of charity is the beneficiary of another's virtue, a virtue denied to the recipient, charity creates a morally asymmetric relationship. It would be ridiculous to praise someone for *receiving* charity; being in that position is a sign of failure and inferiority. (197)

Thus, disability, when seen through the lens of charity, implies a state of immaturity and failure, a backward and deficient human quality always subject to a 'catching up' process. Such a representation is both stigmatizing and stereotypical, and as Bickenbach notes, "creates a chasm between the virtuous 'givers' and the worthy, but utterly dependent, passive, deferential, and humble 'receivers' of alms" (192).

What disability scholars and activists have since demanded from charitable organizations and society at large is the total eradication of any and all representations which cast individuals with disabilities in a light of dependency and helplessness. Such exploitative images reflect and re-inscribe the naturalized able-bodied/disabled binary at work in society and its assertion that impairment is an innate human flaw, a symptom of one's disloyalty to the established codes of 'normality'. What is required, instead, is a drastic and revolutionary charge in our conventional vision of humankind, a change which celebrates the idea that all human beings are equal in dignity and character. Jerome Bickenbach, in reference to conventional charitable representations, adeptly contextualizes the merits of initiating such a change:

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[16] Please refer to Jerome E. Bickenbach's 1993 text *Physical Disability and Social Policy* for a brief but

> Acts of altruism (or even acts of charity) would neither create nor sustain dependency and stigmatization if they took place against *the background of equality*. When my actions are not a demonstration of my power, prestige, or virtue, and yours are not a demonstration of your dependency, impotence, and inferiority, then my assisting you cannot be construed as an action that creates inequality. (198 my emphasis)

Bickenbach and his contemporaries emphatically maintain that society must be reorganized around this principle of 'equality' if the disability myths at the core of its design are to be abolished. Only against this 'background of equality' can individuals, 'disabled' and 'able-bodied' alike, exercise and enjoy their human rights and freedoms, freedoms which protect both their dignity and power of self-definition.

Conclusion

In the '*Extracts*' section of Melville's *Moby-Dick* – an introductory gambit which features a collection of biblical and literary allusions to whales and the business of whaling – Edmund Burke puts the following question to the Nantucket Whale-Fishery: "And pray... what in the world is equal to it?" (84). Since the 'Melville Revival' of the early 1920s, students and scholars of American Literature have asked the same question of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. For nearly a century, Melville's text has been championed as an American masterpiece, an ingenious and extraordinary *tour de force* unmatched in its imaginative vigor and enigmatic style. The source of much of the text's critical acclaim revolves around the unconventionality of its form; Melville's conscious amalgam of seemingly incongruous stylistic patterns – his deliberate fusion, for example, of soliloquy, poetry, verisimilitude and allegory – is celebrated not only for its aesthetic merit, but for its

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comprehensive examination of the history of public and private charities.

bold repudiation of nineteenth-century literary techniques and conventions. Coupled with this praise for Melville's inventive rhetorical style is a similar critical appreciation of the thematic content of his work. *Moby-Dick* is lauded, for instance, as a monumental exposition of the deep and often dark recesses of human consciousness, and as a singular expression of the dauntless nature of the human spirit. Thus, Melville's combination of unique stylistic patterns and engaging thematic concerns has and continues to evoke both feeling and reflection from the reader.

What *Moby-Dick*'s supporters and the academic community in general fail to acknowledge, however, is the extent to which Melville, in spite of his anti-conformist sensibilities, reproduces his culture's mythic assumptions about disability and the 'disabled'. His portraits of Pip and Ahab, in particular, evince the presence and workings of an oppressive 'normative' regime, a regime which delineates and legitimates the idea that the 'disabled' are mysterious 'others,' ethereal freaks inherently worthy of their inferior social status. These stereotypical images of the 'disabled,' in turn, reflect and reinforce the pre-established, culturally-fixed idea that impairment automatically revokes an individual's right to participate freely and completely in all areas of public life. Such images, moreover, re-inscribe the prejudicial assumptions ordering disability myths, assumptions which, when internalized by a culture's majority, facilitate stigmatizing attitudes toward and dehumanizing actions against the culturally-sanctioned 'enemy' bodies.

For the disability demythologist, in turn, *Moby-Dick* presents an interesting and important set of concerns. Firstly, it reveals the extent to which nineteenth-century American society internalized popular disability myths; even Melville, a cultural renegade

seemingly unafraid to challenge social norms and oppressive hierarchies, aligned himself with the conventional practice of objectifying and, thus, vilifying individuals with impairments. Secondly, the virtual absence of contemporary critical response to the issues surrounding disability representation in *Moby-Dick* signals the presence and naturalized status of disability myth in twentieth-century Western consciousness. In light of these factors, it is the role of the demythologist to isolate and re-problematize the images of disability that appear in *Moby-Dick*, images founded on the mythic formula of 'impairment-equals-other'. Such a reading, in its emphasis on promoting social awareness of disability issues, helps to further the efforts of the *Disability Movement* and its attempts to restore power and dignity to the unjustly disenfranchised 'disabled' minority. This essentially deconstructionist operation, moreover, displaces and, subsequently, challenges normative conceptions of corporeality, and reveals the extent to which such formulations are founded on *cultural* (rather than *natural*) variables. Thus, *Moby-Dick*, when explored through this particular critical lens, becomes an important and invaluable teaching device, a pedagogic weapon in the fight against disability discrimination and oppression.

CONCLUSION

The Path to Equality

Since its inception in the late 1960s, the *Disability Rights* movement has concentrated its efforts on securing equal rights and freedoms for the often stigmatized and oppressed 'disabled' minority. Echoing the sentiments of their Civil Rights predecessors, disability activists demand that public policies, programs and procedures be reorganized around a principle of 'equality,' a standard of conduct that guarantees all individuals the right to economic self-sufficiency, independent living and full integration into the multifaceted dimensions of social life. Included in these initiatives is a call for the total eradication of the injurious and unfounded assumptions ordering conventional disability myths; no longer valid, for instance, are the traditional ideas that disability is a symptom of an individual's innate inferiority or a material badge that warrants his/her expulsion from the mainstream processes of living. For such influential disability theorists as Harlan Hahn, Michael Oliver, Victor Finkelstein, Mary Johnson and Irving Kenneth Zola, and such organizations as the *American Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities* and the *Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation*, this palpable shift from an 'individual' to a 'social' model of disability – a model which locates disability squarely within an exclusionary and biased social body – marks the beginnings of a new egalitarian and, thus, liberating social order.

Proponents of the *Disability Rights* movement maintain that the survival of this budding commonwealth is largely contingent upon the identification and, subsequent,

elimination of negative images of disability from all forms of public media. Accordingly, works of literature become, for the disability demythologist, appropriate sources of investigation, important cultural materials to penetrate and de-scramble. As outlined in the first chapter of this study, images of disability, whether in the shape of the blind prophet of Ancient Greece, the wise-fool of Shakespearean tragedies or the 'crippled' villain of the contemporary crime/mystery and horror genres, have been a staple in literature throughout its recorded history. What remains constant in the vast majority of these representations is the idea that a character's impairment is the defining feature of his/her persona, the key to unlocking the mysteries of his/her internal composition. Moreover, because impairment is often charged with a symbolic force in literary narratives – it typically functions to delineate one's kinship with the dark forces of evil, one's perverse sense of reality and one's unbalanced and, thus, insufficient psyche – characters with disabilities are seen and understood as unusual outsiders, mysterious and abnormal personages lacking an essential 'human' centre. In his characterization of Ahab and Pip, Herman Melville, despite his unconventional style and thematic content, reflects and reproduces this traditional idea that individuals with disabilities are curious and enigmatic 'others,' deviants of the normal and, by extension, natural world. Hence, for Ahab and Pip, impairment is not only the source *and* emblem of their mystique but the very core of their selfhood, the essence of their perplexing personas.

What these and similar literary representations connote to the reading public is that the 'disabled,' simply by virtue of their impairments, exist in reality as subhuman entities, as beasts that tread just beyond the borders of humanity. Such discriminatory attitudes and

assumptions facilitate, in turn, the systematic exclusion of individuals with disabilities from mainstream activities and opportunities; thus, when a social body internalizes these exploitative myths, any conduct which dehumanizes and humiliates the abject 'others' – segregation practices, involuntary institutionalization, forced sterilization, even genocide – seems but a natural social process, an eternally-sanctioned system of control. In view of this adverse chain of events, we, as students of literature and literary theory, bear a certain social responsibility to isolate and actively demythologize such demeaning and, ultimately, destructive representations of disability. If we are to contribute to the *Disability Movement* and its goal of securing equal rights and freedoms for the disenfranchised 'disabled' minority we must denaturalize the conventional beliefs normalizing discriminatory images of disability, beliefs founded on the erroneous but nonetheless accepted notion that the 'disabled' are abhorrent bodies to be loathed or pitied. We must, moreover, focus our demythologizing gazes on canonized texts – texts which not only reach an extremely wide readership, but which are celebrated in academic circles as the greatest (and, by extension, most important) works of their time – and challenge any signs of this discriminatory and stigmatizing mode of characterization. Such efforts will function to promote an awareness of disability issues and concerns, and to encourage future writers and/or critics to eliminate such injurious representations from the body of their own work. More importantly, however, this demythologizing effort will initiate a process whereby power can be restored to the disempowered disabled minority; such an effort, in its emphasis on deprivilegizing conventional assumptions about disability and on destabilizing the all-encompassing yet wholly arbitrary hierarchy of able-bodied over disabled, will

facilitate a dialectic space wherein individuals with disabilities can begin to reclaim both agency and dignity – fundamental human rights which have, for centuries, evaded their collective grasp. In the conclusion to *Images of the Disabled, Disabling Images*, a compilation of articles devoted entirely to investigating images of disability in the social sphere, editors Alan Gartner and Tom Joe succinctly summarize the merits of such revisionary thoughts and actions:

> Persons with disabilities are not treated seriously because they have limited power and are seen as neither whole nor equal. And they are seen that way because they have limited power. Work then needs to be carried out on both sides of the equation: in changing the images and in changing the opportunity structure. At present, the disabling images constrain opportunities and the resulting limited achievements confirm the images. It can be different. Changed images lead to new opportunities and the achievements resulting from such opportunities will alter images. It is time, then, to work on both, to transform the reciprocal relationship between image and opportunity from an engine of oppression to a motor of liberation. (208)

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