

Plot, Representation, and *Moby-Dick**

Ikuno Saiki

The purpose of this paper is to consider the function of plot in *Moby-Dick* and Ishmael's view of representation concealed behind that plot. As Haydon White observes, "there is no value-neutral mode of emplotment, explanation, or even description of any field of events, whether imaginary or real" (34). When events are narrated, there necessarily exists some kind of authority which brings coherence to the narrative or determines its meaning. But this authority, in other words "the center," "was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play" (Derrida 280). Ishmael, the narrator, expresses this ambivalent nature of narrative by using and abusing the conventional plot.

Moby-Dick obliges its reader to find an explanation for Ahab's monomania. Neal L. Tolchin, for example, writes that "Melville attempts to transform the mania into both penetrating insight into the tragic dimensions of existence and the heroic resistance to Fixed Fate" (118). But it is not strictly correct to remark that Ahab can not resist the fate. He is rather willing to imitate a prearranged plan. The point is that the story is not moved by Ahab's subjectivity but by the conventional progress of the plot. He adheres to the fixed meaning and the ending of the story, and as a result of that, he is deprived of his own will and becomes a mere function of the

plot which is shaped in advance. I will also insist that Ahab's story reveals the arbitrariness of the plot which is the very outcome of our desire for a chronological and a causal system.

Causality is indispensable for our act of thinking. The mechanism of a causal system, then, can be explained from the rhetorical point of view. As Jonathan Culler writes in *On Deconstruction*, "the principle of causality asserts the logical and temporal priority of cause to effect" (86). He cites a pain as an example. When a person feels a pain, he soon tries to search for the cause, for instance, a pin, and constitutes a link between them. And then he changes the order, from "effect to cause" to "cause to effect." "The causal scheme is produced by a metonymy or metalepsis (substitution of cause for effect) ; it is not an indubitable foundation but the product of a tropological operation" (86-7). Though we cannot do without a causal system, it is no natural thing but the consequence of arbitrary manipulation.

Captain Ahab is a person obsessed with causality. The fact that his leg is taken away by Moby Dick keeps existing as an effect of the past event. He cannot live without looking for the cause of the White Whale's attack. But it is impossible for him, or for anybody, to decide Moby Dick's intention. The origin of his outrageous hatred towards the whale is this causeless effect. His boundless energy to chase Moby Dick shows exaggeratedly the human nature to demand a causal order.

Because Ahab cannot find the cause of Moby Dick's aggression, his quest is, ironically, deprived of causality, and lays emphasis only on the temporal order. It is useful to quote from Wai-chee Dimock : Ahab's "universe is one of mimetic repetition : in trying to dismember his dismemberer, he is trying to be like the whale, to do what the whale has done to him. Vengeance affirms the primacy of temporal continuity, of mimesis in time" (120). As a result of monomaniacal quest for the whale, time-sequence becomes dominant over Ahab's story.

Let us now attempt to extend the observation into the idea of the relationship between plot and characters. In *The Pursuit of Signs (PS)*, Culler argues about the “double logic” in narrative : One is “presenting its plot as a sequence of events which is prior to and independent of the given perspective on these events,” the other is “suggesting by its implicit claims to significance that these events are justified by their appropriateness to a thematic structure” (178). Events can be replaced by the actions of characters, and a thematic structure with plot. So there is a battle between plot and characters for hegemony in every narrative.

Frank Kermode also propounds “the conflict between the deterministic pattern any plot suggests, and the freedom of persons within that plot to choose and so to alter the structure” (30). This conflict itself is performed in *Moby-Dick*. Ahab’s story is a story *about* the coercive plot and his helpless resistance and complete defeat. It is typical of a story in which “a plot triumphs too completely” in Forster’s words. “The characters have to suspend their natures at every turn, or else are so swept away by the course of fate that our sense of their reality is weakened” (92). Although Ahab seems to be powerful enough to operate the plot, it is the plot itself that actually controls the story.

The first point to be observed is that Captain Ahab is certainly described as an autocratic person controlling the Pequod. He declares the purpose of the voyage like this : “This is what ye have shipped for, men ! to chase that white whale on both sides of earth, till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out” (163). The white whale is called Moby Dick, which “dismasted” Ahab. His personal spite towards Moby Dick turns into the crews’ common interests when they shout back to Ahab, “A sharp eye for the White Whale ; a sharp lance for Moby Dick !” (163). Ahab’s own intention to dismember his dismemberer is transferred into everybody’s aim, and even determines the direction of the story.

Besides revenge, Ahab has another motive for the attack against the whale ; to make inarticulate things articulate. He implies this ardent desire in these sentences :

All visible objects, man, are but pasteboard masks. But in each event — in the living act, the undoubted deed — there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask ! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall ? To me the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me ; he heaps me ; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate ; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. (164)

What Ahab tries to do here is to give reasonable explanation for unreasonable matters. It is, in other words, interpretation, an attempt to find meaning. For Ahab, Moby Dick means the “inscrutable malice.” He suppresses the possibility of there being naught beyond the unreasoning masks. That Moby Dick is malicious becomes the hermeneutic code which forces the story to rush towards the destructive ending.

We must be careful, however, not to decide that Moby Dick is evil, because its very inscrutableness compels Ahab to name it the inscrutable malice. He cannot stand the situation in which grasping meaning is impossible.

Ahab's hatred towards instability of meaning is best shown in the scene of his confronting the coffin life-buoy. He says :

Here now's the very dreaded symbol of grim death, by a mere hap, made the expressive sign of the help and hope of most endangered life. A

life-buoy of a coffin ! Does it go further ? Can it be that in some spiritual sense the coffin is, after all, but an immortality-preserver ! I'll think of that. But no. (528)

Then he commands the carpenter, "I go below ; let me not see that thing here when I return again" (529). As the carpenter transforms the coffin into the life-buoy, the thing which represents death in nature turns into what means life. The coffin life-buoy possesses the contrary meanings, death and life, at the same time. Ahab detests this kind of contradiction most.

Thus we can conclude from these points that the purpose of the voyage, or even the direction of the story is determined by the subjectivity of Ahab.

But it is also true that there is a certain kind of power which forces Ahab to rush towards the ending. He describes the energy as follows :

What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it ; what cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me ; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time ; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart, I durst not so much as dare ? Is Ahab, Ahab ? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm ? (545)

Ahab, who seems to be the maker of the plot, is just moved by the inscrutable thing ; that is the plot itself. In *Moby-Dick*, as Seymour Chatman suggests in *Story and Discourse*, "the 'characters' are deprived of choice, and become in a real sense mere automatic functions of the plot" (114). John P. McWilliams is quite right when he says, "Ishmael can never be wholly certain whether Ahab is motivated by revenge, self-assertion, or by a noble desire to rid the world of evil" (161). Though we are inclined to assume that there is powerful subconscious motivation behind Ahab's behavior, it cannot

be specified because Ahab is merely “obsessed with the end of his quest” (163). It is the linear progress of plot that possesses him. So he is drawn as a paradoxical person who both has strong desire to order things and gets irritated to be fixed in the system organized by the other, or the plot.

Let me cite more examples for making clear that the story is not moved by Ahab’s will but by the pre-arranged plot. There is a symbolical scene in which he looks at the chart to guess at the white whale’s trace and, at the same time, the plot is written in him by the unseen hand :

While thus employed, the heavy pewter lamp suspended in chains over his head, continually rocked with the motion of the ship, and for ever threw shifting gleams and shadows of lines upon his wrinkled brow, till it almost seemed that while he himself was marking out lines and courses on the wrinkled charts, some invisible pencil was also tracing lines and courses upon the deeply marked chart of his forehead. (198)

The first thing that one notices is that it is not Ahab, but possibly Moby Dick, that determines the course of the story. The narrator indicates that “the sperm whales, guided by some infallible instinct — say, rather, secret intelligence from the Deity — mostly swim in *veins*,” or in other words, “along a given ocean-line” (199). Ahab just tries to follow this given course. Besides the whale, however, there exists some hidden power like “the Deity” that constitutes the plot.

Ahab himself notices that he is manipulated by some agent. He feels that he is forced to act the role “Ahab” in the drama. He declares, “Ahab is for ever Ahab, man. This whole act’s immutably decreed. ‘Twas rehearsed by thee and me a billion years before this ocean rolled. Fool ! I am the Fates’ lieutenant ; I act under orders” (561). Here Ahab expresses his resolution to imitate completely the given plot to the end. He “believes his

search must follow a prearranged plan," as Robert L. Caserio says, "must have a beginning, middle, and end, must thoroughly enact and externalize — even if ruthlessly — the hidden relations among himself, his men, and the whale" (137). His role is the monomaniacal desire for concluding the story as determined.

The prophesies are the most typical elements which set the fixed goal for the story. The tragic ending of the Pequod and the ominous fate of Ahab are foretold by some people. The first clue is given to Ishmael by Captain Peleg when Ishmael signs a contract with the Pequod. Peleg explains that Ahab got his wicked name because his crazy mother gave it to him. And he continues to say, "And yet the old squaw Tistig, at Gav-head, said that the name would somehow prove prophetic. And perhaps, other fools like her may tell thee the same. I wish to warn thee. It's a lie" (79). Here Peleg tries to ignore Tistig's prophecy, and Ishmael believes him though he feels "a strange awe" of Ahab.

The second prophecy is more probable, as it is told by the man who has the name of a prophet, Elijah. Elijah stops and asks Ishmael and Queequeg if they have signed the articles and if anything has been written down there about their souls. And he goes on to say, "Well, well, what's signed, is signed ; and what's to be, will be ; and then again, perhaps it won't be, after all. Any how, it's all fixed and arranged a'ready ; and some sailors or others must go with him, I suppose. . ." (93). Here he implies that their souls will be possibly taken away during the voyage, and affirms that the fate is already fixed. This accident brings Ishmael "all kinds of vague wonderments and half-apprehensions," but Queequeg and he agree that Elijah is "nothing but a humbag."

The words by Pip are more concrete. He says, "Ha, ha ! old Ahab ! the White Whale ; he'll nail ye !" (435). Because Pip is called an idiot by his shipmates after he was cast away, his prophecy is doubtful. But *Moby Dick*

actually nails Ahab at the end of the story just as Pip prophesies.

Finally the most definite prophecy is made by Fedallah, the Parsee. He enigmatically informs Ahab, "I said, old man, that ere thou couldst die on this voyage, two hearses must verily be seen by thee on the sea ; the first not made by mortal hands ; and the visible wood of the last one must be grown in America" (499). The former hearse must be *Moby Dick* which becomes the one for Ahab while the latter must be the *Pequod* which is swallowed by the waves with crew and all. Then he predicts his own death and says, "Though it come to the last, I shall still go before thee thy pilot," and prophesies Ahab's last moment, "Hemp only can kill thee" (499). It has turned out just as he said : Fedallah was caught among the tangles of Ahab's line and dragged down into the ocean on the second day of chasing the whale, and the hempen line was tied around Ahab's neck on the third and last day.

Thus every prediction becomes true in the future in *Moby-Dick*. This is what Ronald E. Martin has to say on the matter : "Prophecy would be accurate foreknowledge of a single predestined line of truth" (42). As the prophecies constitute the plot in advance, all the events are justified by this framework of the story. It will be clear from these examples of prophecy that the story's "conclusion is based not on new evidence concerning a past deed but on the force of meaning, the interweaving of prophecies and the demands of narrative coherence" as Culler says, discussing the story of *Oedipus* (*PS* 174). The direction and meaning of narrative is compelled to be determined beforehand by the prophecies. Culler goes on to write : "We can say that the crucial event is the product of demands of signification. Here meaning is not the effect of a prior event but its cause" (174). The reader of *Moby-Dick* is forced to interpret it along the prophecy's coersive signification. The prophecies reveal meaning prepared in the story.

Ahab's story does not leave room for discussion about "the appropriate-

ness or inappropriateness of an ending” (PS 178), because the disastrous conclusion is prophesied several times. According to the prophecies, the ending is absolutely appropriate. But we cannot find sufficient reason for the death of Ahab and the Pequod’s crew brought by the Whale’s attack.

These results lead to the conclusion that Ahab’s story does not contain a plot, but is a story about a plot. While Ahab is eager to find causality in all the events and to fix the meaning of everything, he himself is placed in the prearranged plot which is deprived of a causal system and only has a chronological order or the direction towards the predestined ending. Ahab’s story exhibits the characteristics of plot which forces us the absolute meaning.

We must now draw attention to the producer of the plot. Ahab cries in despair, “Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm ?” If it is neither Ahab nor God that lifts his arm, who lifts it ? It is only the story-maker Ishmael who can manipulate the characters in his own way. He represents his role as a story-teller as follows :

If, then, to meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways, I shall hereafter ascribe high qualities, though dark, weave round them tragic graces ; if even the most mournful, perchance the most abased, among them all, shall at times lift himself to the exalted mounts ; if I shall touch that workman’s arm with some ethereal light ; if I shall spread a rainbow over his disastrous set of sun ; then against all mortal critics bear me out in it, thou just Spirit of Equality, which hast spread one royal mantle of humanity over all my kind. (117)

What is immediately apparent in this extract is that Ishmael can have God-like authority to arrange the plot as he likes.

Ishmael, however, describes himself as being one of the victims who are

under the power of fate :

And, doubtless, my going on this whaling voyage, formed part of the grand programme of Providence that was drawn up a long time ago. . . . Though I cannot tell why it was exactly that those stage managers, the Fates, put me down for this shabby part of a whaling voyage, when others were set down for magnificent parts in high tragedies, and short and easy parts in genteel comedies, and jolly parts in farces — though I cannot tell why this was exactly ; yet now that I recall all the circumstances, I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which being cunningly presented to me under various disguises, induced me to set about performing the part I did, besides cajoling me into the delusion that it was a choice resulting from my own unbiased freewill and discriminating judgement.
(7)

The first thing that one notices here is the passiveness of Ishmael. He announces that he inevitably performed the role given by the Fates. This situation seems to be just like Ahab's, because they both were forced to behave in accordance with the prearranged plan while they themselves believed that they acted under their own will.

But when we take Ishmael as a narrator more seriously than the one as a character, we conclude that Ishmael is rather an operator of the plot than an impotent sailor. As Freda E. Yeager suggests, there are two different views about Ishmael : “a dark Ishmael in the narrator's past” and “the mature Ishmael” who “looks back in time and relates his youthful experience in language” (153). We cannot know about but only guess at the dark Ishmael indirectly, for the whole narrative is told by the mature Ishmael. Relevant to this point is Chatman's following remark in *Coming to Terms* :

I do deny that the narrator can inhabit both discourse and story at the

instant of narration. . . . The act of telling or showing the story should not be confused with the act of experiencing the events, of “seeing” them as a character inhabiting story-time and -space sees them. The narrator does not “see” anything from perspective within the story : he/she/it can only report what happens from a post outside. The difference is crucial. (123)

So what we should discuss is the role of narrator, Ishmael.

Let us now return to the matter of powerless Ishmael. It is his tactic to hide the narrator’s strict control over the story. He does not actually do just as the Fates dictate ; he merely pretends to be a passive person, as Caserio points out in the following quotation :

In terms of plot, Melville dramatizes himself through Ishmael as not actively telling or willfully writing his story and its ending. As an author and agent he, like his hero, wants to be seen as thrown clear of his work, as passive, himself at the mercy of the instability that “features” event. This is his way of proving he is not the story’s dictator, an Ahab-like sultanist of the brain. (149)

Instead of revealing that he himself is the manipulator of the plot, Ishmael makes Ahab obsessively pursue the meaning of the whale and try to put things in order.

The image of the weaving God is another illustration of the same point. While Pip drifted out to sea alone, he “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” (414). And Ishmael often compares his act of narrating to weaving fabric : “Interweaving in its proper place this darker thread with the story as publicly narrated on the ship, the whole of this strange affair I now proceed to put on lasting

record" (243). What these passages make clear at once is that the narrator possibly has God-like authority to determine the story.

Ishmael not only disguises himself as a powerless character but also resists the plot which is in fact made by him. When Ahab devoted himself to chasing Moby Dick, he noticed that he oversailed the whale and said, "Aye, he's chasing *me* now ; not I, *him*" (564). Here the linear progress of the plot is denied by reversing the positions of the pursuer and the pursued.

There are chapters which look irrelevant to the Pequod story. Cetological explanation and philosophical consideration are often presented as if they are obstructive to the development of the plot. These apparently unnecessary elements are utilized both to question the plot's orderly progression and to suggest the possibility of another kinds of representation.

It is the arbitrariness of the plot that Ishmael wants to tell us through Ahab's story. The point is expressed in the Carpenter's words : "I like to take in hand none but clean, virgin, fair-and-square mathematical jobs, something that regularly begins at the beginning, and is at the middle when midway, and comes to an end at the conclusion" (525). This is a sentence spoken by the Pequod's carpenter when he is ordered to make over a coffin into a life-buoy. The tautology which appears in these words shows that he fixes the beginning, middle and the end of his work beforehand. Ishmael tries to explain here that the making of the plot is, just like the carpenter's favorite job, a tyrannical operation of the story-maker.

On these grounds I have come to the conclusion that Ishmael self-consciously expresses his sense of plot through making and subverting Ahab's story.

The ultimate cause for Ishmael's inertness is an encounter with Moby Dick. What makes him hesitate to narrate is the existence of the object which has no decisive meaning. Moby Dick represents the absence of the signified. It functions as a metaphor placed at the center of the text : What

it means profoundly influences the interpretation of the whole story. But the meaning of *Moby Dick* is never fixed in the end. As the lines with harpoons and lances are pulled into the sea by the whale and the crew's attempt to catch it is concluded in failure (559), it resists all interpretation. Ishmael recognizes this undecisiveness of meaning and becomes what Leo Bersani calls "the hermeneutical ground of all modes of interpretation" (224) : Ishmael, without actively suggesting his own view of things, leaves the possibility of various significances open.

Then, what is *Moby Dick* ? Ahab is the only person who clearly answers this question : It is "inscrutable malice" (164) for him. Let us consider whether the evil nature of *Moby Dick* can be assured. The white whale appears in front of the *Pequod's* crew, including Ishmael, just during the three-day chase described in the last three chapters. When the whale comes into view for the first time, "a gentle joyousness — a mighty mildness of repose in swiftness, invested the gliding whale" (548). But an hour passed and *Moby Dick* reappeared "with that malicious intelligence ascribed to him, sidelingly transplanted himself, as it were, in an instant, shooting his pleated head lengthwise beneath the boat" (549). As Starbuck warned Ahab, "*Moby Dick* seeks thee not" (568), the whale once "seemed swimming with his utmost velocity, and now only intent upon pursuing his own straight path in the sea" (568). But at last he attacked and killed all the crew except for Ishmael. There is no evidence supporting *Moby Dick's* malice. Sometimes it looks indifferent to Ahab and the *Pequod*, and other times it seems to have the clear intention to destroy them. Thus Ahab's interpretation of *Moby Dick* is wrong, or at least, it is impossible to conclude that the white whale is evil.

Ahab himself is not quite sure that *Moby Dick* is "inscrutable malice." He suppresses the possibility of another interpretation ; there is "naught beyond" the whale (164). And it is Ishmael's view that *Moby Dick* signifies

nothing or everything.

Even the existence of *Moby Dick* cannot be amply proved, for it is “not only ubiquitous, but immortal” (183) according to superstitions. It may transcend the limits of time and space. The whale exists everywhere and we cannot confirm where he is. Ubiquity is equivalent to absence ; the whale keeps escaping from our perception.

The most outstanding characteristic of *Moby Dick* is its color, its whiteness. Ishmael confesses that “it was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me” (188). The essence of our horror is condensed into the whale’s whiteness. He suggests that the whiteness is “the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors,” or both “a dumb blankness” and “full of meaning” (195). While the whiteness urges us to find unlimited meanings in it, it rejects all the interpretations.

It is a serious problem for Ishmael how he can represent *Moby Dick* which has no determined meaning. Ishmael defines *Moby Dick* as “a very white, and famous, and most deadly immortal monster” (256) in “Town-Ho’s Story.” This expression seems to be too short, simple and even banal to indicate what the whale is. The reader of *Moby-Dick* is far from satisfied with this definition and will ask for more explanation as the audience of the story does :

“‘Moby Dick’ !” cried Don Sebastian ; “St. Domminic ! Sir sailor, but do whales have christenings ? Whom call you Moby Dick ?”

“A very white, and famous, and most deadly immortal monster, Don ; — but that would be too long a story.” “How ? how ?” cried all the young Spaniards, crowding.

“Nay, Dons, Dons — nay, nay ! I cannot rehearse that now. Let me get more into the air, Sirs.”

“The chica ! the chica !” cried Don Pedro ; “our vigorous friend looks faint ; — fill up his empty glass !” (256)

As Philip J. Egan suggests, “Apparently, he [Ishmael] is not telling them his best story. Moreover. . . it is surely not without meaning that he nearly faints when pressed for more details about Moby Dick” (343). Ishmael rejects their request by losing consciousness because it is impossible for him to tell more about Moby Dick. Though Egan continues to comment on this scene that “the whole incident suggests that at this moment of his life, he is not yet capable of facing that terrifying reality” (343), I do not share this opinion. It is not because Ishmael is too immature to confront the reality but because Moby Dick can be hardly represented by anybody that Ishmael nearly falls senseless. The difficulty in presenting Moby Dick in words is proved by the fact that we cannot understand what Moby Dick is, even after reading through the long story of Ahab and the white whale. Ishmael notices that he could not get to the nearer point in representing Moby Dick than “a very white, and famous, and most deadly immortal monster,” even if he wastes more and more words.

Not only Moby Dick but also all the whales keep escaping from Ishmael’s representation. But he never gives up putting them into words. One of the examples in which he manages to explain what the whales are is comparison with writing. He tries to interpret the marks of the whale’s surface as hieroglyphics :

In life, the visible surface of the Sperm Whale is not the least among the many marvels he presents. Almost invariably it is all over obliquely crossed and re-crossed with numberless straight marks in thick array, something like those in the finest Italian line engravings. . . . These are hieroglyphical ; that is, if you call those mysterious cyphers on the walls of pyramids hieroglyphics, then that is the proper word to use in the present connexion. By my retentive memory of the hieroglyphics upon one Sperm Whale in particular, I was much struck with a plate representing the old Indian characters chiselled on the famous hieroglyphic pali-

sades on the banks of the Upper Mississippi. Like those mystic rocks, too, the mystic-marked whale remains undecipherable. (306)

There is a reason that Ishmael compares the whale's marks to hieroglyphics ; he intends to show how mysterious, undecipherable and impossible to understand a sperm whale is. Hieroglyphics are nothing but a meaningless collection of figures if one does not know how to read them, but at the same time there is a possibility that they are full of meaning. Like hieroglyphics, the skins of whales may be filled with meanings, but they just remain mysterious marks for Ishmael.

Because the definition of the whales is incomplete, "a reader. . . is constantly preoccupied with the problem of penetrating beyond what he sees as sets of words to something more essential or, at least, more relevant" (Guetti 16). But no one could draw a perfect picture of the whale :

Any way you may look at it, you must needs conclude that the great Leviathan is that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last. True, one portrait may hit the mark much nearer than another, but none can hit it with any very considerable degree of exactness. So there is no earthly way of finding out precisely what the whale really looks like. (264)

It is true that we cannot penetrate beyond what we read ; reality exists only in the writing. Although Ishmael cannot represent the whales perfectly, he cannot but try to "hit the mark much nearer than another."

The whales, including Moby Dick, instruct Ishmael that there is something which cannot be articulated. It is the crisis for the narrator when he finds himself unable to define what the whale is. But Ishmael is not forced to be silent, because he knows the nature of language and narrative. It is

useful to quote from Todorov :

It is the very nature of language to parcel out what can be said into discontinuous fragments. . . . Now literature exists by words ; but its dialectical vocation is to say more than language says, to transcend verbal divisions. It is, within language, that which destroys the metaphysics inherent in all language. (167)

Ishmael notices both that language makes reality fragmentary and that literature as the mass of language tries to transcend the language itself. He, therefore, resists the inscrutable by collecting many voices or various kinds of interpretation. Nina Baym comments on Ishmael's language :

His voice, taking up all other voices in turn but resting in none of them, is analog yet opposite to the whale's whiteness : although it is the sum of all voices, as white is the sum of all colors, it leads to fullness rather than to absence. If there is a void at the center of the universe, there is no void at the center of *Moby-Dick*, where Ishmael's voice creates the illusion of divine plenitude. (918)

Ishmael intends to fill the blankness which the whales make with the words. But at the same time his narration is the "illusion" of fullness.

Thus the absence of authoritative discourse makes the interpretation of *Moby-Dick* undeterminable. This is what Culler has to say on the matter :

When reading a work that apparently lacks an authoritative metalanguage or that ironically questions the interpretive discourses it contains, critics feel uneasy, as if they were just adding their voice to the polyphony of voices. They lack evidence that they are indeed in a metalinguistic position, above and outside the text. (*On Deconstruction* 199)

Ishmael cries desperately : “This whole book is but a draught — nay, but the draught of a draught. Oh Time, Strength, Cash, and Patience !” (145). He renounces the metalinguistic role as a narrator ; he never leads the readers to the meaning of *Moby-Dick*. We are at a loss to find anything certain in the text.

The very title of the novel suggests the absence of the signified. There is only endless substitution from one signifier to another signifier : *Moby Dick* ; or, *The Whale* ; or, *The White Whale* ; or, the inscrutable malice ; or, “a very white, and famous, and most deadly immortal monster” (256) ; or, “a Sperm Whale of uncommon magnitude and malignity” (180) ; or, “big white God” (178) ; or. . . . What *Moby Dick* is signified remains an unresolved enigma. We may, therefore, reasonably conclude that *Moby Dick* indicates the unbridgeable gulf between the signifier and the signified.

In *Moby-Dick*, the impulse to represent struggles with the indefinite object. Ishmael, who notices that no one can establish the truth of what the white whale means, transfers the narrator’s authority to decide the story’s destination to Ahab. Ahab is made to perform a counterfeit director and to fail to fix the meaning of *Moby Dick*. Ishmael, after all, sacrifices Ahab for protecting his function as a storyteller. The inscrutable white whale with outrageous strength and the writer’s might to pen are doomed to survive.

*This is the expanded and revised version of the paper presented at the 47th General Meeting of the Chûbu branch of the English Literary Society of Japan on October 7, 1995.

Works Cited

- Baym, Nina. “Melville’s Quarrel with Fiction.” *PMLA* 94 (1979) : 909-23.
 Bersani, Leo. “Incomparable America.” *Major Literary Characters : Ahab*. Ed.

- Harold Bloom. New York : Chelsea House 1991. 210-27.
- Casario, Robert L. *Plot, Story, and the Novel : From Dickens and Poe to the Modern Period*. Princeton : Princeton UP 1979.
- Chatman, Seymour. *Coming to Terms : The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca : Cornell UP 1990.
- . *Story and Discourse*. Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1978.
- Culler, Jonathan. *On Deconstruction : Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1982.
- . *The Pursuit of Signs : Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*. Ithaca : Cornell UP 1981.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. London and Henley : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.
- Dimock, Wai-Chee. *Empire for Liberty : Melville and the Poets of Individualism*. Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1988.
- Egan, P. J. "Time and Ishmael's Character in the Town-Ho's Story of *Moby-Dick*." *Studies in the Novel* 14 (1983) : 337-47.
- Forster, E. M. *Aspects of the Novel*. Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1979.
- Guetti, James. *The Limits of Metaphor : A Study of Melville, Conrad, and Faulkner*. Ithaca : Cornell UP 1967.
- Kermode, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending : Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. New York : Oxford University Press, 1967.
- McWilliams, John P., Jr. *Hawthorne, Melville, and the American Character : A Looking-Glass Business*. New York : Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- Martin, Ronald E. *American Literature and the Destruction of Knowledge : Innovative Writing in the Age of Epistemology*. Durham : Duke University Press, 1991.
- Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick ; or The Whale*. Evanston and Chicago : Northwestern UP, 1988.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic : A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Trans. Richard Howard. Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1975.
- Tolchin, Neal L. *Mourning, Gender and Creativity in the Art of Herman Melville*. New Haven : Yale UP 1988.
- White, Haydon. "The Fictions of Factual Representation." *The Literature of*

Fact : Selected Papers from the English Institute. Ed. Angus Fletcher.
New York : Columbia University Press, 1976. 21-44.

Yeagar, Freda E. "The Dark Ishmael and the First Weaver in *Moby-Dick*."
Arizona Quarterly 41 (1985) : 152-68.

Synopsis

Plot, Representation, and *Moby-Dick*

By Ikuno Saiki

This paper aims to examine the function of plot and Melville-Ishmael's view of representation in *Moby-Dick*. *Moby-Dick* contains a story which has a beginning, middle and end ; it is the story about the Pequod's pursuit of the white whale under the command of Captain Ahab. Ahab forces all the crew of the Pequod to chase Moby Dick by defining the whale as "the inscrutable malice." The story, therefore, seems to be moved by Ahab's subjectivity. But it soon becomes evident that he is nothing but a function of the prearranged plot. The direction of the story is not determined by Ahab's strong will, but it is constructed according to the established plot.

Ahab's story itself is a story about a story, that is, a narrative which represents exaggeratedly the very characteristics of a story. A story has a plot ; a sequence of events arranged in a chronological and causal order. Ahab embodies temporality and causality. He carries out the plot's orders faithfully : He intently rushes towards the end of the story and insists that each object must have the sole meaning.

It is Ishmael, the narrator, who can create the plot. But he pretends to be a passive observer and covers up the fact that he himself is the story-maker. Ishmael places the authority of narrator on Ahab : Ahab is compelled to fix the meanings of all things. Ishmael makes Ahab play the role of authoritative person whose attempts go wrong at last. And Ishmael even denies the conventions of story : He interrupts the linear progress of the plot by putting the irrelevant elements into the story, presents various interpretations of one thing without deciding which of them is correct, and reveals that his language cannot fully represent the reality.

What makes Ishmael negative is the encounter with Moby Dick. He is

incapable of representing the white whale. Moby Dick would never be articulate : It indicates the absence of the signified. There is a danger that Ishmael might be thrown into silence when he confronts the inexplicable whale. But he overcomes the crisis by telling a story about the difficulties of telling a story. Thus Ahab's story is indispensable to Ishmael, and vice versa : While the narrative of Ahab and Moby Dick keeps Ishmael from giving up to tell, Ishmael's distrust of language shows the essence of representation that words never represent objects as they are.