

ANALYSIS

White-Jacket (1850)

Herman Melville

(1819-1891)

“The story begins and ends with the garment, which also appears reiteratively throughout the novel, a true recurrent theme.... A letter from Melville to [Richard Henry] Dana confirms that a white jacket had actually been a possession of Melville’s on board the *United States*.... White for Melville was ambiguous; it might stand for joy and innocence, it might stand for emptiness and terror. White ranges from funerals to weddings. *White-Jacket* begins with the white-innocence relationship but eventually grows into the white-terror relationship at the end, reaching that point through a series of grotesque scenes depicting rejection. In *Moby-Dick*, white is employed as a terror symbol from the first appearance of the great white whale....

Symbolically, [White-Jacket] wants self-sufficiency, and in this sufficiency to remain aloof from—or above—his fellow sailors.... White-Jacket’s isolation, however, results not from any profound desire to know himself through contemplation but rather from his refusal to participate in the ordinary life of humanity. Though he achieves a momentary harmony, and a superficial one...the evils of the *Neversink* more and more shatter his peace. What White-Jacket was trying to hold and protect was the paradise now almost lost. The jacket is also a symbol of pseudo-self-sufficiency....

The garment fails him. High in the yard-arm, White Jacket almost loses his life when his mates below, mistaking him in his white garment for the ghost of the recently deceased Shenley, ‘hastily lowered the halyards in affright.’ To render himself less conspicuous, he tries to darken the jacket, but the captain of the paint room will give him no paint. Another rejection follows when his fellows at the mess reject him because of his garment, ‘for, had it not been for my jacket, doubtless, I had yet been a member of my old mess’.... Does not the fall from the yardarm with its succession of events (the bloody film, the passivity approaching death, the renewal of life) suggest both the great myth of the Fall of Man and the Christian doctrine of rebirth, ‘A man must lose his life to save it?’ Until a man can take in all of experience, good and evil, he remains a child.... White Jacket came down: one self was annihilated that a new self might be recreated.... Ultimately the meaning of life is to be found in the individual soul.... Each man must be his own savior.”

Howard P. Vincent
“*White-Jacket: An Essay in Interpretation*”
The New England Quarterly 22
(September 1949) 304-15

“The subtitle...suggests the theme that Melville was to drive home in the final chapter: that a ship as socially complex as the *Neversink* is an apt analog for the world, with the Lord High Admiral as God [same symbolism as in *Billy Budd*]. Other symbolic elements in *White Jacket* are less baldly stated. The description of the fall from the mast may be regarded as the loss of innocence; it is the dramatic and stylistic high point in the book. The jacket, too, is susceptible of symbolic interpretation: perhaps it is ego, otherness, or innocence that Melville finally succeeds in shedding. In any event Melville was becoming interested in the meaning of whiteness, an interest which became a fascination in *Moby-Dick*....

Melville seems to have met several sailors interested in literature. One, whom he used in the book as comic relief, is an irretrievably minor poet; but another, Jack Chase, became a major figure in Melville’s imagination. Chase was a scholar-seaman, a tough-minded sailor with the soul of a poet, admired by everyone from coal-tender to captain. He is the one ideal figure in all Melville’s novels, a man equally of the head and the heart. Forty years after *White Jacket*, Melville dedicated *Billy Budd* to his memory, although the hero of that later book is but a tragically flawed reflection of the original. It might also be noted that Melville remembered the hypocritical Master-at-Arms, Bland, in *Billy Budd* when he drew the portrait of Claggart.... As punishment aboard the *Neversink* was flogging, Melville again took vociferous

exception to the manner in which man treats his fellow man, and there is no question that, as propaganda, *White Jacket* helped in the abolishment of the 'cat'."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 724-25

"In a letter to Judge Lemuel Shaw in 1849, Melville made the well-known disparaging remark about two books he had just completed, *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*: 'But no reputation that is gratifying to me, can possibly be achieved by either of these books. They are two *jobs*, which I have done for money--being forced to it, as other men are to sawing wood'.... Certainly, between the book's lofty humanitarian rhetoric and the lowly function ascribed to it there is a marked discrepancy which raises many questions about Melville's intentions. As I see it, *White-Jacket* is a deeply divided book, divided not only in mood, aim, and manner of narration but, most fundamentally, in the implied relation between author and reader....

Comradeship is easily the dominant mode of intercourse between author and reader in *White-Jacket*. Certainly it is the informing spirit behind the well-known anti-flogging chapters.... Melville the reformer is confident and relentless because presumably there exists a bond of shared sentiments and beliefs between him and his readers which gives him the license to speak out.... Against the Melville of the reformist chapters, there is another Melville, ill-contented and acrimonious, a Melville eager not to befriend his readers but to disconcert them.... However sporadic, Melville's ill-natured assaults on the reader directly contradict *White-Jacket*'s dominant fraternal mood.... Battle scenes in *White-Jacket* are strictly gratuitous, strictly interpolations, and to accommodate them Melville uses a number of devices—"told stories," recollections by war veterans, or simply fantasies....

White-Jacket is full of chatty metaphors about war and other occasions of bloodshed.... In each case the metaphor welds together two incongruous realms of existence, the man-of-war's and the reader's, and in each case the effect is to domesticate war, to naturalize it within the landscape of civilian America. Because war is talked about with so much homeyness and so little astonishment, and in such comfortable language, it becomes a pedestrian affair, a routine diet, something that can be talked about without raising an eyebrow. If readers of war stories are able tolerate atrocity to an unconscionable degree, Melville gives ironic utterance to their callousness by his gastronomic metaphors, which turn the war into a regular feast for ordinary Americans. In this convivial mood, in the familiar setting of pleasure and comfort, injustice and brutality become tame and acceptable....

Melville's cynical view of readers turns out to be historically justified. His contemporaries *did* indeed enjoy lurid stories no less than lofty sermons, a fact well understood and exploited by other authors besides Melville.... In his alternate use of moralism and sensationalism, Melville is merely following an accepted and expedient convention among sea writers. However, if he knows his readers well enough to meet their taste, he also knows them well enough to scorn them. His metaphors ironically give vent to his distaste, and parody his readers in their complacency and hard-heartedness.... *White-Jacket* is finally an embittered book, bearing the full burden of its author's disaffection. It is, as Melville himself admits, in a letter to Dana in 1849, 'rather man-of-warish in style—rather aggressive I fear' (*Letters*, p.93)....

In these moments Melville impresses us not as a cautious practitioner dutifully and grudgingly plying his trade but as a heady swimmer, just short of being carried away by his own verbal torrents. This linguistic liberty was apparently resented by some contemporary reviewers, several of whom found fault with Melville's verbosity and his lack of purpose.... Even favorable reviewers sounded apologetic when they were confronted with Melville's verbal excesses.... There is another Melville operating just beneath the surface of the text—a morose, sardonic Melville, the exact opposite of his sociable self.... Melville ruptures his reasonable discourse and revenges himself on us. However, the very act of revenge attests to the dominance of the reader. Melville is truly free only when he becomes self-sufficient in his fiction, only when the reader ceases to matter to him in one way or another. In certain moments of verbal excess Melville achieves this rare indifference. The most exuberant sections of *White-Jacket* are also the most readerless."

Wai-chee S. Dimock
"White-Jacket: Authors and Audiences"

Nineteenth-Century Literature 36.3 (December 1981) 296-317

Michael Hollister (2015)