

217 QUOTATIONS



Herman Melville

(1819-1891)

Herman Melville wrote the greatest American novel in *Moby-Dick* (1851), two world class novellas in *Benito Cereno* (1855) and *Billy Budd* (1891) and the classic short story “Bartleby the Scrivener.” All have been filmed. The best adaptation of *Moby-Dick* is by John Huston, the best adaptation of *Billy Budd* is by Peter Ustinov. Melville’s first novel *Typee* (1846) is autobiographical, based on his experiences living among cannibals in the Marquesas Islands. After his return from whaling, he read widely in literature and philosophy, becoming an expert in comparative mythology, knowledge he expressed in allusions and parallels to myths throughout his works. Melville was inspired by his older friend Hawthorne and learned how to write allegory from him, though they differed in their beliefs—Hawthorne a Christian, Melville an agnostic pantheist. Melville is the closest America has come to producing a Shakespeare. In *Moby-Dick* he is a precursor of Modernism, yet later in his darkest moods, most notably in *Pierre* (1852) and *The Confidence Man* (1857), he becomes cynical and Gothic, a precursor of Postmodernism. Members of his family thought he was crazy. Among the most intellectual of novelists, Melville thinks allegorically in figurative language, using a ship recurrently as a symbol of society, the world, and the soul. His life was a quest for the Truth that turned him from liberal to conservative, and from idealistic to tragic.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, autobiographical, career, “wicked book,” allegory, body and soul, head and heart, human nature, narcissism, multiple viewpoints, the world, self, individualism, interdependence, society, Socialism, woman, Victorianism, women’s rights, gender equality, love, sex, race, humanity, Democracy, revolution, America, westward movement, philosophy, Truth, the whale as Truth, inversion, solipsism, projection, God, Christ, Christ-evoking, Christianity, criticism of clergy, Calvinism, determinism and free will, religion, faith, agnosticism, Existentialism, Nature, Platonism, pantheism, transcendent consciousness, balance, writing, style, wordplay, irony, Solomon, Dana, Coleridge, Montaigne, Poe, Emerson, Hawthorne, Shakespeare, critics, Captain Vere, old age, circularity of life, advice, death, afterlife, immortality:

YOUTH

Call me Ishmael.

A whale ship was my Yale College and my Harvard.

It is not down in any map; true places never are.

Until I was twenty-five, I had no development at all. From my twenty-fifth year I date my life.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

At sea a fellow comes out. Salt water is like wine, in that respect.

Yes, as everyone knows, meditation and water are wedded forever.

It is impossible to talk or to write without apparently throwing oneself helplessly open.

Let us speak, though we show all our faults and weaknesses—for it is a sign of strength to be weak, to know it, and out with it.

Turning, he to-and-fro paced the cabin athwart, in the returning ascent to windward climbing the slant deck in the ship's roll, without knowing it symbolizing thus in his action a mind resolute to surmount difficulties even if against primitive instincts strong as the wind and the sea.

I am, as I am; whether hideous, or handsome, depends upon who is made judge.

To be hated cordially is only a left-handed compliment.

A smile is the chosen vehicle of all ambiguities.

I ain't crazy! [1877]

CAREER

You ask for “documentary evidences” of my having been at the Marquesas—in Typee,—Dear Sir, how indescribably vexatious, when one really feels in his very bones that he has been there, to have a parcel of blockheads question it!

They are two jobs, which I have done for money [*Redburn* and *White-Jacket*—being forced to it, as other men are to sawing wood.

What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the other way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches.

Dollars damn me; and the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding the door ajar.

What “reputation” H.M. has is horrible. Think of it! To go down to posterity is bad enough, any way; but to go down as a “man who lived among the cannibals”!

Though I wrote the Gospels in this century, I should die in the gutter.

“WICKED BOOK”

A sense of unspeakable security is in me this moment, on account of your having understood the book [*Moby-Dick*]. I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb. Ineffable socialites are in me... Content—that is it; and irresponsibility; but without licentious inclination. I speak now of my profoundest sense of being, not of an incidental feeling. [to Hawthorne]

ALLEGORY

That unsounded ocean you gasp in, is Life; those sharks, your foes.

For the ship is a bit of terra-firma cut off from the main; it is a state in itself; and the captain is its king.

I had some vague idea while writing it [*Moby-Dick*], that the whole book was susceptible of an allegoric construction, & also that parts of it were—but the specialty of many of the particular subordinate allegories, were first revealed to me, after reading Mr. Hawthorne's letter, which, without citing any particular examples, yet intimated the part-&-parcel allegoricalness of the whole. [To Sophia Hawthorne; the letter from Hawthorne to Melville is lost.]

Why, ever since Adam, who has got to the meaning of this great allegory—the world? Then we pygmies must be content to have our paper allegories but ill comprehended. [to Hawthorne]

BODY AND SOUL

You cannot hide the soul.

Yes, these eyes are windows, and this body of mine is the house.

HEAD AND HEART

Her heart was...in the country. She did not at all love the city and its empty, heartless, ceremonial ways.

HUMAN NATURE

In man or fish, wriggling is a sign of inferiority.

There is nothing namable but that some men will undertake to do it for pay.

And many damn-my-eyes humbugs there are in this man-of-war world of ours.

Toil is man's allotment, toil of brain, or toil of hands, or a grief that's more than either.

The grand points of human nature are the same today as they were a thousand years ago. The only variability in them is in expression.

“Ye two are the opposite poles of one thing; Starbuck is Stubb reversed, and Stubb is Starbuck, and ye two are all mankind.”

Man, in the ideal, is so noble and so sparkling, such a grand and glowing creature, that over any ignominious blemish in him all his fellows should run to throw their costliest robes. That immaculate manliness we feel within ourselves, so far within us, that it remains intact though all the outer character seem gone; bleeds with keenest anguish at the undraped spectacle of a valor-ruined man.

And since Nature generally takes away with one hand to counterbalance her gifts with the other, excessive animal courage, in many cases, finds room in a character vacated of loftier things.

Appalling is the soul of a man! Better might one be pushed off into the material spaces beyond the uttermost orbit of our sun, than once feel himself fairly afloat in himself.

As a statue, planted on a revolving pedestal, shows now this limb, now that; now front, now back, now side; continually changing, too, its general profile; so does the pivoted, statued soul of man, when turned by the hand of Truth.

Deep, deep, and still deep and deeper must we go, if we would find out the heart of a man; descending into which is as descending a spiral stair in a shaft, without any end, and where that endlessness is only concealed by the spiralness of the stair, and the blackness of the shaft.

Take high abstracted man alone; and he seems a wonder, a grandeur, and a woe. But from the same point, take mankind in mass, and for the most part, they seem a mob of unnecessary duplicates.

NARCISSISM

And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life, and this is the key to it all.

Ahab leaned over the side, and watched how his shadow in the water sank and sank to his gaze, the more and the more that he strove to pierce the profundity... From beneath his slouched hat Ahab dropped a tear into the sea; nor did all the Pacific contain such wealth as that one wee drop.

MULTIPLE POINTS OF VIEW

“I look, you look, he looks, we look, ye look, they look.” [Pip]

Say what some poets will, Nature is not so much her own ever-sweet interpreter, as the mere supplier of that cunning alphabet, whereby selecting and combining as he pleases, each man reads his own peculiar lesson according to his own peculiar mind and mood.

THE WORLD

There now, do you see the soul. In its germ on all sides it is closely folded by the world, as the husk folds the tenderest fruit; then it is born from the world-husk, but still now outwardly clings to it;—still clamors for the support of its mother the world, and its father the Deity. But it shall yet learn to stand independent, though not without many a bitter wail, and many a miserable fall.

The sun hides not the ocean, which is the dark side of this earth, and which is two thirds of this earth. So, therefore, that mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, that mortal man cannot be true—not true, or underdeveloped. With books the same. The truest of all men was the Man of Sorrows, and the truest of all books is Solomon’s, and *Ecclesiastes* is the fine hammered steel of woe. “All is vanity.” ALL. This willful world hath not got hold of unchristian Solomon’s wisdom yet.

SELF

Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return!

Amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still for ever centrally disport in mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve round me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy.

INDIVIDUALISM

Islanders seem to make the best whalemén. They were nearly all Islanders in the Pequod, *Isolatoés* too, I call such, not acknowledging the common continent of men, but each *Isolato* living on a separate continent of his own.

Glimpses do ye seem to see of that mortally intolerable truth, that all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and

earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore? But as in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God—so, better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety!

Know ye, now, Bulkington?

Delight is to him—a far, far upward, and inward delight—who against the proud gods and commodores of this earth, ever stands forth his own inexorable self.

INTERDEPENDENCE

Just so, from the ship's steep side, did I hold Queequeg down there in the sea, by what is technically called in the fishery a monkey-rope, attached to a strong strip of canvas belted round his waist...my own individuality was now merged in a joint-stock company of two... I saw that this situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes; only, in most cases, he, one way or other, has this Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals. If your banker breaks, you snap; if your apothecary by mistake sends you poison in your pills, you die.

SOCIETY

...civilized hypocrisies and bland deceits...

In this world, shipmates, sin that pays its way can travel freely, and without passport; whereas Virtue, if a pauper, is stopped at all frontiers.

Mere self-interest, then, if no better motive can be enlisted, should...prompt all beings to charity and philanthropy. [satire of Benjamin Franklin]

Mrs. Tartan was an excellent sort of lady, as this lady-like world goes. She subscribed to charities, and owned five pews in as many churches, and went about trying to promote the general felicity of the world, by making all the handsome young people of her acquaintance marry one another.

Something further may follow of this Masquerade.

SOCIALISM

So at last I was fain to return to my old level, and moralize upon the folly, in all arbitrary governments, of striving to get either *below* or *above* those whom legislation has placed upon an equality with yourself.

WOMAN

At rows of blank-looking counters sat rows of blank-looking girls, with blank, white folders in their blank hands, all blankly folding blank paper... The girls did not so much seem accessory wheels to the general machinery as mere cogs to the wheels. ["The Tartarus of Maids"]

Womanly beauty, and not womanly ugliness, invited him to champion the right. Be naught concealed in this book of sacred truth.

VICTORIANISM

For a lovely woman is not entirely of this earth.

Imaginatively exalted by the willing suffrages of all mankind into higher and purer realms than men themselves inhabit; beautiful women—those of them at least who are beautiful in soul as well as body—do, notwithstanding the relentless law of earthly fleetingness, still seem, for a long interval, mysteriously exempt from the incantations of decay; for as the outward loveliness touch by touch departs, the interior beauty touch by touch replaces that departing bloom, with charms, which, underivable from earth, possess the ineffaceableness of stars.

“A noble boy, and docile” —she murmured.

WOMEN’S RIGHTS

“Up, up, Isabel, and take no terms from the common world, but do thou make terms to it, and grind thy fierce rights out of it!” [Pierre]

GENDER EQUALITY

“We are equal here; mark *that*, too, Isabel. I do not stoop to thee, nor thou to me; but we both reach up alike to a glorious ideal!” [Pierre]

LOVE

Love is both Creator’s and Savior’s gospel to mankind... Love is this world’s great redeemer and reformer; and as all beautiful women are her selectest emissaries, so hath Love gifted them with a magnetical persuasiveness, that no youth can possibly repel.

SEX

Squeeze! Squeeze! Squeeze! all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers’ hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say,—Oh! My dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness. Would that I could keep squeezing that sperm for ever! For now, since by many prolonged, repeated experiences, I have perceived that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart...I saw long rows of angels in paradise, each with his hands in a jar of spermaceti....

Over the face of Pierre there shot a terrible self-revelation; he imprinted repeated kisses upon her; pressed hard her hand; would not let go her sweet and awful passiveness. Then they changed; they coiled together, and entangledly stood mute.

RACE

As though a white man were anything more dignified than a whitewashed negro.

[Pip and Dutch-Boy] made a match, like a black pony and a white one, of equal developments.

Of all insults, the temporary condescension of a master to a slave is the most outrageous and galling.

Captain Delano took to Negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs.

“You are saved,” cried Delano, more and more astonished and pained; “you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?”

“The Negro.” [Benito Cereno]

HUMANITY

Friendship at first sight, like love at first sight, is said to be the only truth.

We cannot live only for ourselves. A thousand fibers connect us with our fellow men.

The earliest instinct of the child, and the ripest experience of age, unite in affirming simplicity to be the truest and profoundest part for man.

Surrounded as we are by the wants and woes of our fellowmen, and yet given to follow our own pleasures, regardless of their pains, are we not like people sitting up with a corpse, and making merry in the house of the dead?

“It’s a mutual, joint-stock world, in all meridians. We cannibals must help these Christians.”

“Blessed are the peacemakers, especially the fighting peacemakers!”

Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!

DEMOCRACY

Thou shalt see it shining in the arm that wields a pick or drives a spike; that democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God; Himself! The great God absolute! The centre and circumference of all democracy! His omnipresence, our divine equality!

Any American landsman may hope to become President of the Union—commodore of our squadron of states. And every American sailor should be placed in such a position, that he might freely aspire to command a squadron of frigates.

In strange contrast to the hardly tolerable constraint and nameless invisible domineerings of the captain’s table, was the entire care-free license and ease, the almost frantic democracy, of those inferior fellows the harpooners.

It seems an inconsistency to assert unconditional democracy in all things, and yet confess a dislike to all mankind—in the mass. But not so.

REVOLUTION

Straightway the Revolution itself became a wrongdoer, one more oppressive than the kings.

It was something caught from the Revolutionary Spirit that at Spithead emboldened the man-of-war’s men to rise against real abuses, long-standing ones, and afterwards at the Nore to make inordinate and aggressive demands—successful resistance to which was confirmed only when the ringleaders were hung for an admonitory spectacle to the anchored fleet.... Reasonable discontent growing out of practical grievances in the fleet had been ignited into irrational combustion as by live cinders blown across the Channel from France in flames.... To some extent the Nore Mutiny may be regarded as analogous to the distemping irruption of contagious fever in a frame constitutionally sound, and which anon throws it off.... Discontent foreran the two mutinies, and more or less it lurkingly survived them. Hence it was not unreasonable to apprehend some return of trouble sporadic or general. [*Billy Budd*]

[On the other hand] There are times when even the most potent governor must wink at transgression, in order to preserve the laws inviolate for the future.

AMERICA

Let us away with this leaven of literary flunkeyism towards England.

Those who are solely governed by the Past stand like Lot’s wife, crystallized in the act of looking backward, and forever incapable of looking before.

Let America first praise mediocrity even, in her children, before she praises...the best excellence in the children of any other land.

And we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world.... God has predestinated, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls. The rest of the nations must soon be in our rear. We are pioneers of the world; the

advance-guard, sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a new path in the New World that is ours.

There is a Catskill eagle in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces. And even if he for ever flies within the gorge, that gorge is in the mountains; so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar.

WESTWARD MOVEMENT

The march of conquest through wild provinces, may be the march of Mind; but not the march of Love.

PHILOSOPHY

A man thinks that by mouthing hard words he understands hard things.

For after all, philosophy—that is, the best wisdom that has ever in any way been revealed to our man-of-war world—is but a slough and a mire, with a few tufts of good footing here and there.

TRUTH

Truth is in things, and not in words.

You must have plenty of sea-room to tell the Truth in.

Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges.

When a man is in a really profound mood, then all merely verbal or written profundities are unspeakably repulsive, and seem downright childish to him.

For the more and the more that he wrote, and the deeper and the deeper that he dived, Pierre saw the everlasting elusiveness of Truth; the universal lurking insincerity of even the greatest and purest written thoughts.

Truth is the silliest thing under the sun. Try to get a living by the Truth and go to the Soup Societies. Heavens! Let any clergyman try to preach the Truth from its very stronghold, the pulpit, and they would ride him out of his church on his own pulpit banister.

All the world does never gregariously advance to Truth, but only here and there some of its individuals do; and by advancing, leave the rest behind; cutting themselves forever adrift from their sympathy, and making themselves always liable to be regarded with distrust, dislike, and often, downright—though, oftentimes, concealed—fear and hate.

And through Pierre's mind there then darted a baleful thought; how that the truth should not always be paraded; how that sometimes a lie is heavenly, and truth infernal.

Then again, he sunk utterly down from her, as in a bottomless gulf, and ran shuddering through hideous galleries of despair, in pursuit of some vague, white shape, and lo! [compare the white whale] Two unfathomable dark eyes met his, and Isabel stood mutely and mournfully, yet all-ravishingly before him.

We learn that it is not for man to follow the trail of truth too far, since by so doing he entirely lose the directing compass of his mind; for arrived at the Pole, to whose barrenness only it points, there, the needle indifferently respects all points of the horizon alike.

The dead, blind wall butts all inquiring heads at last.

THE WHALE AS TRUTH

So there is no earthly way of finding out precisely what the whale really looks like.

Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will. But if I know not even the tail of this whale [history], how understand his head? [Godhead]

For unless you own [acknowledge] the whale, you are but a provincial and sentimentalist in Truth. But clear Truth is a thing for salamander giants only to encounter; how small the chances for the provincials then?

It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all.

INVERSION

The needles were exactly inverted...and once more the Pequod thrust her undaunted bows into the opposing wind.

Then the rushing Pequod, freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into that blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's soul.

Give not thyself up, then, to fire, lest it invert thee, deaden thee; as for a time it did me.

SOLIPSISM

The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab; and this round gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician's glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self.

Oh! how immaterial are all materials! What things real are there, but imponderable thoughts?... So far gone am I in the dark side of earth, that its other side, the theoretic bright one, seems but uncertain twilight to me. [Ahab]

PROJECTION

All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the white whale's 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 heart's shell upon it.

GOD

Silence is the only Voice of our God.

Take God out of the dictionary, and you would have Him in the street.

And thus, though the earthly wisdom of man be heavenly folly to God; so also, conversely, is the heavenly wisdom of God an earthly folly to man.

We mortals are all on board a fast-sailing, never-sinking, world-frigate, of which God was the shipwright, and she is but one craft in a Milky-Way fleet, of which God is the Lord High Admiral.

“Queequeg no care what god made him shark,” said the savage, agonizingly lifting his hand up and down; “wedder Fejee god or Nantucket god, but de god what made shark must be one dam Ingin.”

The reason the mass of men fear God, and *at bottom dislike* Him, is because they rather distrust His Heart, and fancy Him all brains like a watch. (You perceive I employ a capital initial in the pronoun referring to the Deity; don't you think there is a slight dash of flunkeyism in that usage?)

Rail as all atheists will, there is a mysterious, inscrutable divineness in the world—a God—a Being positively present everywhere;—nay, He is now in this room; the air did part when I here sat down. I displaced the Spirit then—condensed it a little off from this spot.

CHRIST

The truest of all men was the Man of Sorrows.

Bacon's brains were mere watchmaker's brains; but Christ was a chronometer; and the most exquisitely adjusted and exact one, and the least affected by all terrestrial jarrings, of any that have come to us.

Follow your leader at your peril.

CHRIST-EVOKING

Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable except from the original sources.

Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance.

I render no accounts; I am what I am. [Pierre]

At the same moment it chanced that the vapory fleece hanging low in the East was shot through with a soft glory as of the fleece of the Lamb of God seen in mystical vision, and simultaneously therewith, watched by the wedged mass of upturned faces, Billy ascended, and, ascending, took the full rose of the dawn.

Then would Claggart look like the man of sorrows.

CHRISTIANITY

Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian.

Are there no Moravians in the Moon, that not a missionary has yet visited this poor planet of ours, to civilize civilization and christianize Christendom?

Once more the sermon proceeded. "Your voraciousness, fellow-critters, I don't blame ye so much for; dat is natur, and can't be helped... You is sharks..." "Well done, old Fleece!" cried Stubb, "that's Christianity; go on."

But, alas! the practices of whalemens soon convinced him that even Christians could be both miserable and wicked; infinitely more so, than all his father's heathens...poor Queequeg gave it up for lost. Thought he, it's a wicked world in all meridians; I'll die a pagan.

Heaven have mercy on us all—Presbyterians and Pagans alike—for we are all somehow dreadfully cracked about the head, and sadly need mending.

CRITICISM OF CLERGY

How efficacious, in all despotic governments, it is for the throne and altar to go hand in hand.

A chaplain is the minister of the Prince of Peace serving in the host of the God of War—Mars...he lends the sanction of the religion of the meek to that which practically is the abrogation of everything but brute Force.

That unaccountable cone,—longer than a Kentuckian is tall, nigh a foot in diameter at the base, and jet-black as Yojo [backwards O joy], the ebony idol of Queequeg...when removing some three feet of it, towards the pointed extremity, and then cutting two slits for arm-holes at the other end, he lengthwise slips himself bodily into it. The mincer now stands before you invested in the full canonicals of his calling...mincing the horse-pieces of blubber for the pots... Arrayed in decent black; occupying a conspicuous pulpit; intent on bible leaves; what a candidate for an archbisho-*prick*, what a lad for a Pope were this mincer! [italics added]

Yes, the world's a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow.

CALVINISM

This great power of blackness in [Hawthorne] derives its force from its appeal to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free.

“Natural Depravity: a depravity according to nature.” A definition which, though savoring of Calvinism, by no means involves Calvin's dogmas as to total mankind. Evidently its intent makes it applicable but to individuals.... dominated by intellectuality.

DETERMINISM AND FREE WILL

Chance, free will, and necessity—no wise incompatible—all interweavingly working together.

RELIGION

A man's religion is one thing, and this practical world quite another.

“With mankind,” [Vere] would say, “forms, measured forms, are everything.”

But when a man's religion becomes really frantic; when it is a positive torment to him; and, in fine, makes this earth of ours an uncomfortable inn to lodge in; then I think it high time to take that individual aside and argue the point with him.

But aren't it all sham?

FAITH

Faith, like a jackal, feeds among the tombs, and even from these dead doubts she gathers her most vital hope.

“Tell me not of thy teeth-tiered sharks, and thy kidnapping cannibal ways. Let faith oust fact; let fancy oust memory; I look deep down and do believe.” [Starbuck]

Hope is the struggle of the soul, breaking loose from what is perishable, and attesting her eternity.

Stick to confidence and hopefulness, then, since how mad for the cripple to throw his crutches away.

AGNOSTICISM

Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye.

EXISTENTIALISM

There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke.

“I would prefer not to.” [Bartleby]

In that direction, my windows commanded an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade, which wall required no spyglass to bring out its lurking beauties, but, for the benefit of all nearsighted spectators, was pushed up to within ten feet of my windowpanes. Owing to the great height of the surrounding buildings, and my chambers being on the second floor, the interval between this wall and mine not a little resembled a huge square cistern.... I placed his desk close up to a small side window which originally had afforded a lateral view of certain grimy back yards and bricks, but which, owing to subsequent erections, commanded at present no view at all, though it gave some light. Within three feet of the panes was a wall, and the light came down from far above...

The front of the Sperm Whale’s head is a dead, blind wall.

Almost forgetting for the moment all thoughts of Moby Dick, we now gazed at the most wondrous phenomenon which the secret seas have hitherto revealed to mankind. A vast pulpy mass, furlongs in length and breadth, of a glancing cream color, lay floating on the water, innumerable long arms radiating from its centre, and curling and twisting like a nest of anacondas, as if blindly to clutch at any hapless object within reach. No perceptible face or front did it have; no conceivable token of either sensation or instinct; but undulated there on the billows, an unearthly, formless, chance-like apparition of life.... So rarely is it beheld, that though one and all of them declare it to be the largest animated thing in the ocean, yet few of them have any but the most vague ideas concerning its true nature and form; notwithstanding, they believe it to furnish to the sperm whale his only food.

NATURE

This peaking of the whale’s flukes is perhaps the grandest sight to be seen in all animated nature.

“My God! Mr. Chace, what is the matter?” I answered, “We have been stove by a whale.” [*Narrative of the Shipwreck of the Whale Ship Essex of Nantucket, which was attacked and finally destroyed by a large Sperm Whale in the Pacific Ocean*, by Owen Chace of Nantucket, first mate, 1821]

Queequeg in his own proper person was a riddle to unfold; a wondrous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not even himself could read, though his own live heart beat against them; and these mysteries were therefore destined in the end to moulder away with the living parchment whereon they were inscribed, and so be unsolved to the last.

We lie in nature very close to God; and though, further on, the stream may be corrupted by the banks it flows through; yet at the fountain’s rim, where mankind stand, there the stream infallibly bespeaks the fountain.

PLATONISM

O Nature, and O soul of man! How far beyond all utterance are your linked analogies! Not the smallest atom stirs or lives on matter, but has its cunning duplicate in mind.

“Hark ye, yet again,—the little lower layer. All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But as 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....” [Ahab]

How many, think ye, have likewise fallen into Plato’s honey head, and sweetly perished there?

PANTHEISM

Lifted by those external swells, you needs must own the seductive god, bowing your head to Pan.

“Therefore I hope one day to feel myself drank up into the pervading spirit animating all things.” [Isabel]

There is, one knows not what sweet mystery about this sea, whose gently awful stirrings seem to speak of some hidden soul beneath.

Through the lacings of the leaves, the great sun seemed a flying shuttle weaving the unwearied verdure. Oh, busy weaver! Unseen weaver!—pause!—one word!—whither flows the fabric? What palace may it deck? Wherefore all these ceaseless toilings? Speak, weaver!—stay they hand!—but one single word with thee! Nay—the shuttle flies—the figures float from forth the loom; the freshet-rushing carpet for ever slides away. The weaver-god, he weaves; and by that weaving is he deafened, that he hears no mortal voice... Ah, mortal! Then, be heedful; for so, in all this din of the great world’s loom, thy subtlest thinkings may be overheard afar.... Now, amid the green, life-restless loom of that Arscidean wood, the great, white, worshipped skeleton lay lounging—a gigantic idler! Yet, as the ever-woven verdant warp and woof intermixed and hummed around him, the mighty idler seemed the cunning weaver; himself all woven over with the vines... In this Afric Temple of the Whale I leave you, reader, and if you be a Nantucketer, and a whaleman, you will silently worship there. [pantheistic trinity alternative to Christian]

Not Jove, not that great majesty Supreme! did surpass the glorified White Whale as he so divinely swam.

And warningly waving his bannered flukes in the air, the grand god revealed himself, sounded, and went out of sight.

This spell seemed one with that Pantheistic master-spell, which eternally locks in mystery and in muteness the universal subject world.

TRANSCENDENT CONSCIOUSNESS

In reading some of Goethe’s sayings, so worshipped by his votaries, I came across this, “*Live in the all.*” That is to say, your separate identify is but a wretched one,—good; but get out of yourself, spread and expand yourself, and bring yourself the tinglings of life that are felt in the flowers and the woods, that are felt in the planets Saturn and Venus, and the Fixed Stars. What nonsense! Here is a fellow with a raging toothache. “My dear boy,” Goethe says to him, “you are sorely afflicted with that tooth; but you must *live in the all*, and then you will be happy!” As with all great genius, there is an immense deal of flummery in Goethe, and in proportion to my own contact with him, a monstrous deal of it in me. This “all” feeling, though, there is some truth in. You must often have felt it, lying on the grass on a warm summer’s day. Your legs seem to send out shoots into the earth. Your hair feels like leaves upon your head. This is the *all* feeling. But what plays the mischief with the truth is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion. [to Hawthorne]

Lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absent-minded youth [Ishmael] by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature; and every strange, half-seen, gliding, beautiful thing that eludes him; every dimly-discovered, uprising fin of some undiscernible form, seems to him the embodiment of those elusive thoughts that only people the soul by continually flitting through it. In this enchanted mood, thy spirit ebbs away to whence it came; becomes diffused through time and space; like Cranmer’s sprinkled Pantheistic ashes, forming at last a part of every shore the round globe over.

BALANCE

There is no life in thee, now, except that rocking life imparted by a gently rolling ship, by her, borrowed from the sea; by the sea, from the inscrutable tides of God. But while this sleep, this dream, is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch; slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in a horror. Over Cartesian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at midday, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever. Heed it well, ye Pantheists!

As before, the Pequod steeply leaned over towards the sperm whale’s head, now, by the counterpoise of both heads, she regained her even keel; though sorely strained, you may well believe. So, when on one side

you hoist in Locke's head, you go over that way; but now, on the other side, hoist in Kant's and you come back again; but in very poor plight. Thus, some minds forever keep trimming boat. Oh, ye foolish! Throw all these thunderheads overboard, and then you will float light and right.

WRITING

Art is the objectification of feeling.

It is better to fail with originality than to succeed in imitation.

Know, thou, that the lines that live are turned out of a furrowed brow.

It is with fiction as with religion: it should create another world, but one to which we feel the tie.

To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme. No great and enduring volume can ever be written on the flea, though many there be that have tried it.

He shall now learn, and very bitterly learn, that though the world worship Mediocrity and Common Place, yet hath it fire and sword for all contemporary Grandeur.

STYLE

It was a terrific, most pitiable, and maddening sight. The whale was now going head out, and sending his spout before him in a continual tormented jet; while his one poor fin beat his side in an agony of fright. Now to this hand, now to that, he yawed in his faltering flight, and still at every billow that he broke, he spasmodically sank in the sea, or sideways rolled towards the sky his one beating fin. So have I seen a bird with clipped wing, making affrighted broken circles in the air, vainly striving to escape the piratical hawks. But the bird has a voice, and with plaintive cries will make known her fear; but the fear of this vast dumb brute of the sea, was chained up and enchanted in him; he had no voice, save that choking respiration through his spiracle, and this made the sight of him unspeakably pitiable; while still, in his amazing bulk, portcullis jaw, and omnipotent tail, there was enough to appall the stoutest man who so pitied. [*Moby-Dick*, Chapter 81]

WORDPLAY

It's ominous thinks I. A Coffin my Innkeeper.

IRONY

"I to be murdered here at the ends of earth on board a haunted pirate ship by a horrible Spaniard? Too nonsensical to think of! Who would murder Amasa Delano? His conscience is clean."

"It was not I that brought you here, Bartleby," said I.

SOLOMON

It seems to me now that Solomon was the truest man who ever spoke.

DANA

But if you want the best idea of Cape Horn, get my friend Dana's unmatched *Two Years Before the Mast*.

COLERIDGE

He had drunk at the mystic fountain of Plato; his head had been turned by the Germans; and this I will say, that White Jacket himself saw him with Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* in his hand.

MONTAIGNE

[Captain Vere's] bias was toward those books to which every mind of superior order occupying any active post of authority in the world naturally inclines... unconventional writers, who...like Montaigne, honestly and in the spirit of common sense philosophize upon realities.

POE

[caricature of Poe]: ...a haggard, inspired-looking man now approached—a crazy beggar, asking alms under the form of peddling a rhapsodical tract, composed by himself, and setting forth his claims to some rhapsodical apostleship. Though ragged and dirty, there was about him no touch of vulgarity; for, by nature, his manner was not unrefined, his frame slender, and appeared the more so from the broad, untanned frontier of his brow, tangled over with a disheveled mass of raven curls, throwing a still deeper tinge upon a complexion like that of a shriveled berry. Nothing could exceed his look of picturesque Italian ruin and dethronement, heightened by what seemed just one glimmering peep of reason, insufficient to do him any lasting good, but enough, perhaps, to suggest a torment of latent doubts at times, whether his addled dream of glory were true... In his tattered, single-breasted frock-coat, buttoned meagerly up to his chin, the shatter-brain made him a bow... I take him for a cunning vagabond, who picks up a vagabond living by adroitly playing the madman.

EMERSON

Nay, I do not oscillate in Emerson's rainbow, but prefer rather to hang myself in mine own halter than swing in any other man's swing. Yet I think Emerson is more than a brilliant fellow. Be his stuff begged, borrowed, or stolen, or of his own domestic manufacture he is an uncommon man. Swear he is a humbug—then he is no common humbug.... I was very agreeably disappointed in Mr. Emerson. I had heard of him as full of transcendentalisms, myths & oracular gibberish...let us call him a fool;—then had I rather be a fool than a wise man.—I love all men who *dive*. Any fish can swim near the surface, but it takes a great whale to go down stairs five miles or more... I could readily see in Emerson, notwithstanding his merit, a gaping flaw. It was the insinuation, that had he lived in those days when the world was made, he might have offered some valuable suggestions. These men are all cracked right across the brow.

“Also, we use defects and deformities to a sacred purpose, so expressing our sense that the evils of the world are such only to the evil eye.” [Emerson, “The Poet”] If Mr. Emerson travelling in Egypt should find the plague-spot come out on him—would he consider that an evil sight or not? And if evil, would his eye be evil because it seemed evil to his eye, or rather, to his sense using the eye for instrument?... This is admirable, as many other thoughts of Mr. Emerson's are. His gross and astonishing errors & illusions spring from a self-conceit so intensely intellectual and calm that at first one hesitates to call it by its right name. Another species of Mr. Emerson's errors, or rather, blindness, proceeds from a defect in the region of the heart.

HAWTHORNE

Genius all over the world stands hand in hand, and one shock of recognition runs the whole circle round.

To what infinite height of loving wonder and admiration I may yet be borne, when by repeatedly banqueting on these *Mosses* I shall have thoroughly incorporated their whole stuff into my being—that, I cannot tell. But already I feel that this Hawthorne has dropped germinous seeds into my soul. He expands and deepens down, the more I contemplate him....

For spite of all the Indian-summer sunlight on the hither side of Hawthorne's soul, the other side—like the dark half of the physical sphere—is shrouded in a blackness ten times black. But this darkness but gives more effect to the ever-moving dawn, that for ever advances through it, and circumnavigates his world....it is deep as Dante...

The House of the Seven Gables... The contents of this book do not belie its rich, clustering, romantic title. With great enjoyment we spent about an hour in each separate gable... There is a certain tragic phase of humanity which, in our opinion, was never more powerfully embodied than by Hawthorne.

SHAKESPEARE

I would to God Shakespeare had lived later, & promenaded on Broadway.

CRITICS

There are hardly five critics in America; and several of them are asleep.

CAPTAIN VERE

“Let not warm hearts betray heads that should be cool.”

[Captain Vere] had seen much service, been in various engagements, always acquitting himself as an officer mindful of the welfare of his men, but never tolerating an infraction of discipline; thoroughly versed in the science of his profession, and intrepid to the verge of temerity, though never injudiciously so.

The character of her commander [Vere], it was thought, specially adapted him for any duty where under unforeseen difficulties a prompt initiative might have to be taken in some matter demanding knowledge and ability in addition to those qualities implied in good seamanship.

For it was close on the heel of the suppressed insurrections, an aftertime very critical to naval authority, demanding from every English sea commander two qualities not readily interfusible—prudence and rigor.

Forty years after a battle it is easy for a noncombatant to reason about how it ought to have been fought.

Worthily to command even a frigate, requires a degree of natural heroism, talent, judgment, and integrity, that is denied to mediocrity.

God bless Captain Vere!

OLD AGE

Old age is always wakeful; as if, the longer linked with life, the less man has to do with aught that looks like death.

To know how to grow old is the master work of wisdom, and one of the most difficult chapters in the great art of living.

Some dying men are the most tyrannical; and certainly, since they will shortly trouble us so little for evermore, the poor fellows ought to be indulged.

Is there some principal of nature which states that we never know the quality of what we have until it is gone?

Life is a long Dardenelles, My Dear Madam, the shores whereof are bright with flowers, which we want to pluck, but the bank is too high; & so we float on & on, hoping to come to a landing place at last—but *swoop!* We launch into the great sea!

CIRCULARITY OF LIFE

But the mingled, mingling threads of life are woven by warp and woof: calms crossed by storms, a storm for every calm. There is no steady unretracing progress in this life; we do not advance through fixed gradations, and at the last one pause; —through infancy’s unconscious spell, boyhood’s thoughtless faith, adolescence’ doubt (the common doom), then skepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in manhood’s pondering repose of *If*. But once gone through, we trace the round again; and are infants, boys, and men, and *If*s eternally. Where lies the final harbor, whence we unmoor no more? In what rapt ether sails the world, of which the weariest will never weary? Where is the foundling’s father hidden? Our souls are like

those orphans whose unwedded mothers die in bearing them: the secret of our paternity lies in their grave, and we must there to learn it.

Most grand productions of the best human intellects ever are built round a circle.

ADVICE

Whatever fortune brings, don't be afraid of doing things.

He who has never failed somewhere, that man cannot be great.

DEATH

As good a fellow as ever spouted up his ghost.

AFTERLIFE

All ambitious authors should have ghosts capable of revisiting the world to snuff up the steam of adulation, which begins to rise straightway as the Sexton throws his last shovelfull on him—Down goes his body & up flies his name.

IMMORTALITY

Yet this is nothing; I leave eternity to Thee; for what is man that he should live out the lifetime of his God?

