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## A Journey of Celestial Lights: The Sky as Allegory in Melville's *Moby Dick*

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**Abstract.** Scholars have long sought a blueprint that cohesively ties together various events and characters in *Moby Dick*; a 'key' that will unlock its secrets and allow a greater understanding of the novel. After 150 years, we have Melville's key: the sky. In his PhD thesis, John F. Birk suggested that, as the Pequod sails from one ocean to the next in search of the great white whale, it sails through the twelve traditional constellations of the zodiac. Birk identifies thirteen characters with zodiacal constellations, and a few non-zodiacal constellations with individual chapters. However, Melville's genius goes further in his use of astronomical phenomena than Birk suggests. The Pequod leaves Nantucket at noon on December 25<sup>th</sup> 1838 and is destroyed by the white whale at sunset January 4<sup>th</sup> 1840. His use of six of the nine 'gams' or meetings between the Pequod with other whale ships on the high seas provide the necessary planetary data to precisely determine, for the first time, the year at sea. The white whale provides the day of destruction and constellations the hour. Further, Melville was able to relate phases of the moon, solar eclipses, comets, meteor showers, constellations, stars and other celestial events of that year to story events, structure and characters. Using this new understanding, one can see *Moby Dick* – and indeed the sky – as Herman Melville did. No longer must it remain his '...most admired and least understood novel!'

The new understanding of *Moby Dick* as based in astronomical references both allows us to pinpoint the exact year the novel takes place and elevates the story and characters past a mere whaling tale, and into the heavens. Melville, it is argued, was able to relate phases of the moon, solar eclipses, comets, meteor showers, constellations, stars and other celestial events of that year to story events, structure and characters.

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Some authors believe the novel's structure lies in the nine meetings between the Pequod and other ships it encounters. These meetings, called 'gams', are found scattered between Chapters 52 through 131. Others address the possibility of successive fatal whale encounters as a unifying principle. The first whale encounter occurs in Chapter 48 and ends in Chapter 135 with the final encounter of Moby Dick himself.

An intriguing theory concerning *Moby Dick's* links with the sky can be found in John Birk's book, *Tracing the Round: The Astrological Framework of Moby Dick*.<sup>1</sup> The book's theories have been challenged. For example, Gordon Poole has presented a fair review of it in *Melville Society Extracts* (Number 127 July 2004). This author agrees with much of Poole's criticism but his observations are not relevant to this paper.

Birk divides the novel into 6 blocks corresponding to the 12 traditional signs of the zodiac. As the ship travels from one ocean to the next in search of the whale, it travels through the zodiac. He provides convincing parallels between some major characters to astrological signs. Birk then follows the journey of the Pequod through the six blocks, with examples of some events to parallels in the constellations within the blocks and those constellations north and south of the corresponding zodiacal constellations. In all, Birk identifies thirteen characters with zodiacal constellations, and non-zodiacal constellations with individual chapters, references and events.

These authors recognize a unifying principle, each of these principles demonstrate thematic threads that permeate much of the novel, but each falls short of its goals. If chapter numbers alone are considered, the first whale and the first gam are encountered at nearly a third of the way into the novel. At these points the main characters have been introduced and courses are set. Although Birk's approach encompasses Chapters 1 through 135, he tries and fails to shoehorn characters and events into his astrological frame. He fails to distinguish between an *astrological sign* and an *astronomical constellation*. Birk defines astrology as '... the study of the influence of celestial bodies on humankind'.<sup>2</sup> In the Chapter, 'the Quarter Deck', after witnessing a total solar eclipse coincident with a speech from Ahab, Melville speaks through Ishmael:

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<sup>1</sup> J. F. Birk, *Tracing the Round: The Astrological Framework of Moby Dick* (London: Minerva Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Birk, *Tracing the Round*, p. 26.

Ah, ye admonitions and warnings! why stay ye not when ye come? But rather are ye predictions than warnings, ye shadows! Yet not so much predictions from without, as verifications of the foregoing things within. For with little external to constrain us, the innermost necessities in our being, these still drive us on.<sup>3</sup>

The influence is the opposite of Birk's definition of astrology; according to Melville the influence originates from within and not from without.

This is not to say Birk's approach is without merit. The novel can indeed be broken down into six blocks. When these blocks are based on positions of *astronomical constellations* rather than just Birk's astrological signs, considerably more understanding is achieved. The similarities between constellations, characters and events are curious, but do not prove the sky was Melville's framework for *Moby Dick*. In Figure 1, a number line represents the chapters one through one hundred thirty five. Birk's six blocks of chapter numbers are scaled beneath the number line, and on the number line nine gams are plotted according to their chapters. To this author, the display is reminiscent of a monthly sky chart of planetary positions along the ecliptic once found in popular astronomy magazines. Do the placement of gams within the novel reflect planetary positions along the ecliptic? If so, what purpose does it serve?

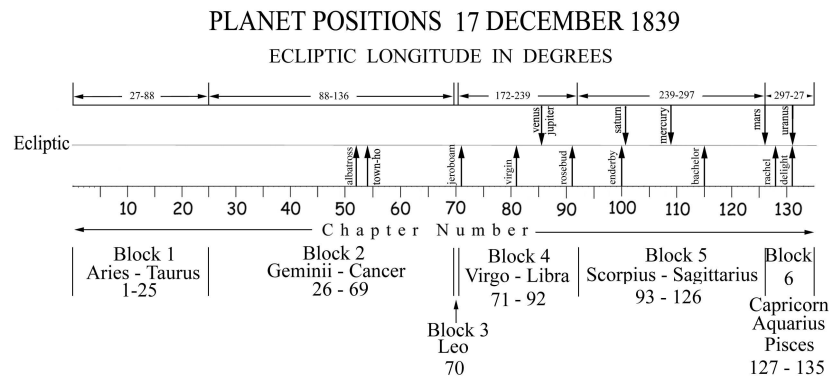


Figure 1.

<sup>3</sup> H. Hayford and H. Parker, *Moby-Dick* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1967), p. 145.

*Chapter 81 The Pequod meets the Virgin*

This gam involves the capture of a large old sperm whale, the largest of a pod of eight whales. The whale is so large that when hoisted alongside the Pequod it nearly capsizes the ship. The whale has an intestinal problem, too much gas, causing the waters behind him to upbubble. Astronomically, eight planets were known in 1851, the largest was Jupiter, also known as a gas giant. In Melville's universe, a large flatulent whale represents Jupiter.

*Chapter 91 The Pequod meets the Rosebud*

The Rosebud is a French ship with two blasted whales alongside. A blasted whale is one that dies 'unmolested' at sea. Through deceit with the French Captain, Stubb gets one of the whales that he believes may contain ambergris, a substance of far greater value than whale oil. Stubb says he 'diddled' the captain. We are told the French are such poor whalers, they often leave their home port loaded with candles since they are not expected to get enough whale oil to 'dip the Captain's wick into'. To 'diddle' and 'dip one's wick' are terms for the sexual act.

A simple plan view schematic of a blasted whale alongside each side of a ship, suggestive of the female genitalia adds another dimension to Melville's description of the smell these whales produced. 'It may well be conceived, what an unsavory odor such a mass must exhale; worse than an Assyrian city in the plague, when the living are incompetent to bury the departed. So intolerable indeed is it regarded by some, that no cupidity could persuade them to moor beside it'.<sup>4</sup> The Rosebud gam represents the planet Venus.

*Chapter 100 The Pequod meets the Samuel Enderby of London*

Ahab boards a ship where the Captain had his forearm taken by Moby Dick. The English Captain sports a sperm whalebone extension. The English Captain and the ship's surgeon relate to Ahab the story of the encounter with the whale. How the first mate maneuvered the ship between the whale and the stove captain, such that Moby Dick was prevented from circling around for a second attack. The Captain relates he had two more chances to lower for Moby Dick, but declined. The surgeon and English Captain exhibit a jovial banter concerning the incident and the Captain's recovery from that wound.

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<sup>4</sup> Hayford and Parker, *Moby-Dick*, p. 337.

*Chapter 101*, 'The Decanter', is an extension of thought from the previous chapter with its introductory sentence, 'Ere the English ship fades from sight...'<sup>5</sup> We are then presented with the history of English whaling, and how Ishmael's experience aboard English ships are marked by the consumption of fine food and good times. The good food and good times suggests the Roman feast of the Saturnalia. Elements of New Year, Christmas and the Mardi Gras rolled into one are the sense of the Saturnalia. This gam can be assigned to Saturn.

The emphasis here is food consumed and time. The English Captain's name is 'Boomer', English slang for a bowel movement. In Melville's view the Captain is full of shit. The surgeon's name is 'Bunger', English slang for an asshole, and the first Mate's name is 'Mounttop', which speaks for itself.

*Chapter 115 The Pequod meets the Bachelor*

The Bachelor was a ship encountered while celebrating an extremely successful voyage of whale hunting. Such celebration included 'Signals, ensigns, and jacks of all colors... flying from her rigging, on every side'.<sup>6</sup> Every barrel aboard ship was filled with whale oil and then some additional casks were bartered from other ships, and these were filled with oil. Whale ships communicate at distance with other ships by flags, and ensigns displayed in the rigging, which suggests the Bachelor represents the planet Mercury as the Roman messenger of gods. The business of whaling is to obtain as much whale oil as possible. A person who stands behind the counter of their store and sells goods is a *merchant*, the goods they sell is *merchandise* and if you wanted to move your business to Tempe Arizona, your contact is with the Chamber of Commerce. Mercury was primarily the deity of merchants.

*Chapter 128 The Pequod meets the Rachel*

Captain Gardiner of the ship Rachel had two sons who lowered for whales the day before. At one time they lost sight of the two whaleboats containing the sons of the Captain. Moby Dick appeared, and apparently destroyed a boat containing one of the sons. The Rachel picked up the other son. Gardiner wants to enlist the Pequod to help in the search of the missing son. Ahab refuses and, as the ships part, the Rachel's '... masts and yards were thickly clustered with men, as three tall cherry trees,

<sup>5</sup> Hayford and Parker, *Moby-Dick*, p. 369.

<sup>6</sup> Hayford and Parker, *Moby-Dick*, p. 407.

when the boys are cherrying among the boughs'.<sup>7</sup> Mars is assigned to the Rachel primarily in his earlier context as a Roman god of agriculture. The name 'Gardiner' and the image of trees ripe with cherries suggest this. Mars looks like a red star, as are the cherries projected against the sky. The Roman God Mars had two sons and Gardiner had two sons.

*Chapter 131 The Pequod meets the Delight*

The Pequod meets a '... ship most miserably misnamed the Delight',<sup>8</sup> sporting a wrecked whaleboat. The Delight was in the process of burying at sea one of five men who died in a battle with Moby Dick. The Captain of the Delight informs us: 'I bury but one of five stout men, who were alive only yesterday; but were dead ere night. Only *that* one I bury; the rest were buried before they died; you sail upon their tomb'.<sup>9</sup> Queequeg's coffin on the Pequod's taffrail is noted; a coffin that serves as a life preserver.

The elements of a misnamed ship, men buried before they died, and a coffin for a life preserver suggests a gam where the expected course of events no longer holds. This parallels a once popular interpretation of Uranus. The days of the week are named after the Sun, Moon and five naked eye planets. Some believe the mythological importance of the number seven relate to this arrangement. This 'natural order' was disrupted with the telescopic discovery of Uranus. This gam is related to Uranus.

If we substitute planet names for the places the respective gams hold in Figure 1, the value of Birk's discovery of six blocks and Melville's genius unfolds. Was there ever a time when, Mercury appeared among the stars of the constellation Scorpius-Sagittarius, at the same time that Venus could be found in the stars of Virgo-Libra, Mars before the stars of Capricorn-Aquarius-Pisces, Jupiter before the stars of Virgo-Libra, Saturn before the stars of Scorpius-Sagittarius, and Uranus before the stars of Capricorn-Aquarius-Pisces? The answer is yes. All the planet positions relative to those constellations, as illustrated on the top half of Figure 1, represent a true period of time. It is a 'window' that opens when Mars enters block six around 17 December 1839. The window closes when Venus leaves the fourth block and enters the fifth block, a date which corresponds to 6 January 1840.

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<sup>7</sup> Hayford and Parker, *Moby-Dick*, p. 436.

<sup>8</sup> Hayford and Parker, *Moby-Dick*, p. 441.

<sup>9</sup> Hayford and Parker, *Moby-Dick*, p. 441.

This window is involved with the end of the Pequod's journey and final encounter with Moby Dick. The last three chapters of the novel are titled: 'The Chase. First Day', 'The Chase. Second Day', and 'The Chase. Third Day'. Those chapters cover a span of time known to folklorists, mythologists and poets as two nights and three days, whose center is the 'dark of the moon'. Viewed from the Earth, one morning shows the crescent moon rising a few minutes before the sun. The next morning the moon is not visible because it is between the earth and sun. On the third day the moon appears in the evening sky just after sunset with an equally thin crescent as seen the first morning. The crescent of the moon on one morning 'dies' by next morning, only to be reborn the third evening. It's literary significance of death and regeneration is how Melville manages the dark of the moon in *Moby Dick*.

A 'dark of the moon' occurs in the window. In the chapter 'The Chase. First Day', the whale is spotted early in the morning '... some mile or so ahead'. On the second day the whale is spotted '... less than a mile ahead', while on the third fateful day, with noon at hand, no whale is seen. Ahab realizes they may have passed the whale so he orders the ship turned around. The whale is spotted an hour later. The relative motions of the Pequod and whale in these last three chapters correspond to the relative positions of the sun and moon for the second, third and fourth days of January 1840; the astronomical new moon occurred mid-morning 4 January 1840.

As Ahab's boat sails past the Pequod for the last time he notes the three harpooners climbing the masts. They are Queequeg, Tashtego and Daggoo, corresponding to the constellations of Hercules, Perseus and Orion. Based on other astronomical information, the Pequod was located latitude of roughly 7 degrees south of the equator, between the Line Islands and the Marquesas. The best fit of these three constellations in the local sky occurs about 4:45 pm. Ahab's last words before darting the final harpoon at Moby Dick begins with: 'I turn my body from the sun'. With sunset about 6:50 pm, Ahab met the white whale for this final encounter between 5:00 and 6:50 on 4 January 1840.

Using clues contained in the text, we should be able to apply these dates to the story and determine the year the Pequod set sails. We are told in Chapter 44, the ship sailed at the time known to whalers as 'the beginning of the Season on the Line...' and Ahab expected to meet Moby Dick during the next Season on the Line, a year later. If late 1839 is the correct year for this meeting, the Pequod sailed the year prior, or 1838. In



Chapter 22 we learn the Pequod left Nantucket on 25 December, and '...as the short northern day merged into night, we found ourselves almost broad upon the wintry ocean, whose freezing spray cased us in ice, as in polished armor. The long rows of teeth on the bulwarks glistened in the moonlight...' To an observer on the ocean off Nantucket on 25 December 1838, the moon was 70 percent illuminated, and high and bright in the sky following sunset. In the same spot, at the same time in 1839 the moon rose just before midnight, too late to occur when 'day merged into night'.

We can bracket the last voyage of the Pequod as 25 December 1838 to 4 January 1840. At first it may seem as though it is just an interesting piece of trivia. To Melville scholars it is a revolution in our understanding of *Moby Dick*. It is now possible to provide interpretations to characters and events, which until now were known only to Melville himself. However, if the theory is to remain more than coincidence, there must be more evidence to support it.

#### *Chapter 52 The Pequod meets the Albatross*

The Pequod is sailing southeastward from the Cape of Good Hope, a heading a few degrees north of east. Ishmael is high aloft in the fore-mast-head when a whaler appears who is long absent from home. The craft is described as bleached, having only her lower sails set. The wooden ship is so old, long channels of reddened rust are seen along her sides. Her spars and rigging were like thick branches of trees furred over with hoar-frost. The crew seemed clad in torn and bepatched skins of animals, and when the Albatross sailed '... close under our stern, we six men in the air came so neigh to each other that we might almost have leaped from the mast-heads of one ship to those of the other...' <sup>10</sup> The captain of the Albatross tried to shout something to the Pequod, but could not be heard, he being *downwind*. Small fish, '... that for some days before had been placidly swimming by our side, darted away with what seemed shuddering fins, and ranged themselves fore and aft with the strangers flanks' <sup>11</sup>

The Albatross is not just old, but ancient. This gam represents the region of the sky occupied by the constellation Argo-Navis. Made famous in the adventures of Jason and the Argonauts, Argo-Navis is drawn on sky charts available in Melville's day as a Greek ship with one sail. The

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<sup>10</sup> Hayford and Parker, *Moby-Dick*, p. 203.

<sup>11</sup> Hayford and Parker, *Moby-Dick*, p. 203.

constellation of Antlia, the air pump (or wind), is located to the north of Argo, a tree at her bow, and two fish (Dorado and Volans) in the water just south of Argo. (Modern charts have broken Argo-Navis into four smaller constellations.)

At the latitude of the Pequod, roughly 35 degrees south, the mast of the constellation Argo would have passed directly overhead, thereby bringing to light the thought of jumping from the masts of the Pequod to the masts of the Argo.

*Chapter 71 The Pequod meets the Jeroboam*

Gabriel, a crewmember of the Jeroboam, takes over the ship. His control over the crew centers on his claimed ability of being able to control an epidemic that had broken out among the crew. Historically, comets have been seen as harbingers of doom and destruction; a prophetic sign from the heavens. An epidemic, the false prophet Gabriel, the inability of the Jeroboam's boat to steady a few yards distant of the Pequod due to heavy wind and waves suggest an astronomical connection between the Jeroboam and comet designated 1840 I.

*Chapter 54 The Town-Ho's Story*

Heading home when the Pequod encounters it, meeting the Town-Ho does not reflect a 'current event' in *Moby Dick*. Historically, the cry 'Town-Ho' was heard when a whale was seen, preceding the now widely known 'thar she blow'. 'Town- Ho' was already an archaic term in 1851 when *Moby Dick* was published, and sets the tone for this chapter: the past, or history. There are three individuals who form the main elements of the mutiny that occurred aboard the Town-Ho. These men represent the history of Ahab's decent into madness. The Captain of the Town-Ho personifies Captain Ahab before Ahab was struck by lightning. Radney, the first mate, is that fraction of Ahab that takes over after Ahab is struck by lightning. Steelkilt is the persona of Ahab we know of in *Moby Dick*. The mutiny is the struggle within Ahab over which persona will dominate.

The Town-Ho left port in the fall of 1835; Halley's comet was closest to the sun in November 1835. When encountered by the Pequod in 1839, the Town-Ho was returning to port after a typical four year whaling voyage. Other insights may be gleaned from the novel based on the date obtained through the sky-theory.

1. Allan Melvill (Herman Melville's father) and Ahab were both born in 1782. Ahab becomes a boy harpooneer at age 18, the same year Allan Melvill went to France. It led to his export import business. Captain Ahab receives a visible scar in 1822, a time when Allan Melvill's business was failing, and Allan commits suicide shortly after. Moby Dick takes Ahab's leg early morning 3 May 1837; the month Melville's mother loses her money in the great depression of 1837.
2. 'Stubb' was the nickname for Mr Hosea Hussey.
3. There is one Pequod. When described as an ordinary whale ship it sports a 'steering wheel'. When described in prose, it boasts a tiller made from the jawbone of a whale. In prose, the ship is made of the constellations of the summer triangle and the head of Draco. Cygnus is the mainmast; the bright star Altair is the base of the mizzenmast and Vega the base of the foremast. The head of Draco is the bow.
4. Bulkington's celestial counterpoint in the sky is Ursa Minor, which contains the North Star. Bulkington disappears as the North Star does when the Pequod crosses the equator heading south.
5. When the Pequod approaches the South China Sea it crosses the Equator heading north. It is then that Pip replaces Bulkington.
6. A 4 January 1840 conjunction between Mars and Neptune is the celestial reflection of Ishmael being rescued by the Rachel. The time break of the rescue on 6 January is the reason for an Epilogue.
7. The 'Spirit Spout' is the Large Magellanic Cloud.
8. Ahab's wound described in the chapter 'Ahab's Leg', was inflicted at sunset 18 September 1838. It is reflected by an annular eclipse of the sun on that date.
9. In a time twist, one can relate Elijah to Starbuck.
10. A third to half the entries in the Discussions of Adopted Readings section, Newberry edition of *Moby Dick*, have an astronomical explanation.

Birk's research and the constellated astronomical sky fulfill the expected characteristics of the long sought blueprint of *Moby Dick*. In the months and years to come, when scholars are satisfied with these pedestrian explanations for the metaphors and events in *Moby Dick*, the work will remain incomplete. Simply identifying the metaphor does not give sufficient appreciation for Melville's observation of Pip: 'So man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and

frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God',<sup>12</sup>

Six sequential 'insanity series' portrait panels of Ahab were painted by Gilbert Wilson in the 1950s.<sup>13</sup> In the first panel, the nearly sixty year old Ahab is depicted as a sea captain of that period. By panel number six; Ahab's eye has morphed into an eclipse, another eye into the moon and an ear into a galaxy. Where is panel number seven? It is not in an art gallery; it is beyond the painter's brush. It cannot be found in a book because it transcends the author's pen. An astronomical instrument cannot survey it. For those descendants of Bulkington, such as is Herman Melville and Pip, who dance on the frame of panel number seven, *that is* what Moby Dick *is*, that is what Melville *meant*.

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<sup>12</sup> Hayford and Parker, *Moby-Dick*, p. 347.

<sup>13</sup> E. A. Schultz, *Unpainted to the Last: Moby Dick and Twentieth-Century American Art* (Kansas: 1995), Plates 37 through 42.

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