



Narrative in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*

Traugott and Pratt define narration as 'essentially a way of linguistically representing past experience, whether real or imagined' (1980: 248). The mode of the teller inevitably affects every aspect of the representation of story. Toolan states that the inherent nature of narrative text as spatially and temporally distant to the reader inevitably leads to a 'sense of the detachment' and 'cut-offness' (1988: 6). This study will assert that narrative mode can decrease this sense of disconnection between reader and the text. Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* is a good example of a strong narratorial presence that seeks to place itself in close proximity with the reader. The intrusive style of narration caused controversy at the time of the novel's publication, with one reviewer claiming that, 'there is so much eccentricity in its style and in its construction... that we are at a loss to determine in what category of works of amusement to place it' (Parker and Hayford (eds.) 1970: 22). In the opening extract of the novel 'narrative trajectory' (Toolan 19188: 6) has not begun, instead the text remains on the level of discourse, allowing for the development of the narrator's manner of telling. This study will examine the unusual narrative mode of *Moby Dick* and demonstrate how narratology can create a sense of closeness between the 'speaker', in this case Ishmael, and the reader, disproving Toolan's assertion.

The narrator of *Moby Dick* begins the text with his introduction, 'call me Ishmael' (1851:1) which immediately establishes a first person narrator, indicated by the first person singular pronoun, 'me'. In Fowler's (1996) four part model of narratorial perspective, Ishmael thus falls into the Type A category, as an internal,

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intradiegetic– homodiegetic narrator. Rimmon–Kenan (1983), however, complicates the apparently straightforward division between intradiegetic and extradiegetic narrators, as being inside or outside of the text, respectively. He argues that first person narrators, 'although not omniscient in principle, when narrating the story [know] 'everything' about it, like the former extradiegetic narrators' (1983: 95). In light of this, because of the authority Ishmael has over the events he has experienced knows everything about his story, he can be called an extra–homodiegetic narrator, despite superficially appearing to be intradiegetic. Toolan summarises Type A narration as taking place from 'a point of view within the character's consciousness, manifesting his or her feelings about and evaluations of the events and characters of the story' (1988: 82). As all events are recounted through the filter of Ishmael's consciousness, intentionally or not, this will colour all aspects of the narrative, because of the subjectivity of what Bal calls 'character–bound narration', or CN (1997: 22). Toolan describes this form of narration as 'intrusive' (1988: 83) because of the extent of control Ishmael has over the text. A previous study has been completed on the issue of unreliability in the works of Melville (Kahn 2005) discussing at great length the problems of Ishmael's subjective narrative. Although these critics are accurate in their descriptions of the problems of CN, the creative effects are overlooked. This study will examine these effects, rather than reproduce material concerned with problems of reliability, which is not the focus of this investigation.

As an autodiegetic narrator, Ishmael is an 'it' pretending to be writing his own autobiography (Bal 1997:22). In the creative act of reading, the intrusive Type A narration enables Ishmael to be transformed into a developed character, despite our knowledge of him as a construction. Structuralists hold the concept of character to be 'a myth,' (Culler 1975: 230). Without affecting the validity of this statement, this study will treat Ishmael as having a 'personality' that is created by narrative technique.



Returning to the first sentence of the novel, 'call me Ishmael,' it is evident that the relationship between the reader and narrator is to be one of close spatial and temporal proximity. Ishmael is immediately established as an identifiable character with explicit personality, rather than an unknown authorial presence. On Halliday's model (2005), 'call' is a verbal process, but without a specified receiver. Ishmael's use of an imperative not only demonstrates his awareness of the reader but the use of elision in omitting whom is the target of Ishmael's instruction demonstrates the close proximity of his audience, making the use of the second person personal pronoun to direct his statement unnecessary. A further inference of the lack of a specified target of the process 'call' is that the reader is the only one present to receive the instruction. By inviting the reader to participate in a verbal process the impression is created that we can interact with Ishmael, further increasing the sense of close proximity. In combination with the informality of only using a first name, Melville has created a sense of intimacy in just three words, going some way to negate the inherency of 'cut-offness' of narrative texts.

An important distinction to make in first person narratives is the difference between versions of the 'I'. Rimmon-Kenan asserts that 'there is no difference between third-person centre of consciousness and first person retrospective narration' (1983: 73), thereby indicating the presence of defined and separate perspectives in the first person narrative. The two forms of 'central consciousness' – the holder of the point of view – (Prince 1987: 12) in first person narration can be described as the *experiencing* narrator and the *experienced* narrator. To translate this to *Moby Dick*, the experienced narrator is the 'mature' Ishmael, the sole survivor of the fight with the great white whale, telling us the story in the narrative 'present'. Bal calls this character narration

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1 (CN1) (1997: 44) because it is closest to us temporally. CN2 therefore, the experiencing narrator, is Ishmael witnessing the 'eternal malice' (1851: 502) of Moby Dick crash into the ship's starboard bow, sinking it. This disparity in point of view complicates the term 'narrator', which does not fully express differences in perspectives. Genette (1980) and Bal (1997) use the term 'focalisation' which is useful in expressing who is the perceiver in the narrative. Bal defines focalisation as 'the relation between "who perceives" and what is perceived' (1997: 8). Chatman criticises the term, stating it does not address the issue of recognising 'different terms for two different narrative agents, narrator and character' (1990: 139). Although Chatman may be correct in asserting the inadequacy of the term in studies of highly complex focalization, Bal's use of the term 'focalisation' and her method of representing different perspectives through a numbering and bracketing system (1997: 23, 44) is effective in expressing who is perceiving. Using her model, Ishmael's narrative style can be expressed:

'It is a way I have of driving off the spleen' (1851:1) can be represented

as:

(I narrate: (I state autobiographically:)) It is a way I have of driving off the spleen.

This demonstrates that the statement is given through the perspective of CN1, because it is Ishmael speaking to us in the narrative 'now' with the authority of giving autobiographic information. The majority of the extract can be represented upon Bal's model in this way. By reporting in the present tense CN1 is placed close to the reader in terms of time. A greater sense of relevance and proximity to Ishmael and his words



arrests the sense of narrative detachment that Toolan describes. It is significant in *Moby Dick* to have this increased proximity between addresser and addressee because of the story's improbability. Ishmael's status as temporally close to the reader masks the outlandishness of his tale.

When using Bal's method of representing focalisation (1997: 158) the manner in which the experienced narrator interacts with his experiencing self is revealed. Chatman's complaint that the homodiegetic act of narration is in fact 'a matter of memory, not of perception' (1990: 145) is irrelevant because, due to the fictional nature of the characters, this study will equate the two terms.

'I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world.'

(1851: 1)

This can be represented as: CF1 ('I') -p [CN2]

This illustrates the character focaliser (CF) Ishmael in the narrative present in the act of perceiving (-p) his past, experiencing self (CN2). Although it was his past self that formulated that had the urge to go to sea it is CN1 who is acting as focaliser. In the extract, there are no examples of a CF2. The absence of the Ishmael's experiencing form acting as focaliser in order to perceive shows that the opening of the novel remains closer to the level of discourse and therefore closer to the reader, once more decreasing the sense of 'cut-offness' that would be created from a distance focaliser. Indeed, the almost constant use of the present tense throughout the extract places Ishmael in very close proximity to the reader. By remaining on the discourse level rather than plunging directly into the plot, Melville constructs a more naturalistic

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introduction to the story. The steady use of the discourse level is imitative of a face to face interaction, where narrative is more likely to be introduced slowly and convolutedly in order to orientate and interest the addressee.

There are only 'some years' (1851: 1) between the CN1 and CN2 of the text. The use of the present tense used to describe Ishmael's disposition, such as 'it is a way I have of driving off the spleen' (1851:1), rather than 'it is a way I *had*', demonstrates that there is little difference between his mature self and his experiencing self in terms of character as well as chronologically, once more closing the gap between the time of the reader's 'present' and the time of the events of the novel and lessening feelings of detachment from the extraordinary novel and narrator. Toolan believes that the use of the present tense in the narrative form of news footage creates the impression of 'simultaneity' and has the effect of 'minimizing the story-narration distance' (1988: 81). This can be applied directly to Melville's use of the present because, due to Ishmael's (CN1) close relation to his younger, experiencing self, the distance of this CN2 of the novel is masked, which greatly narrows the distance between the CN1-reader interaction and the action.

Despite the strength of the presence of the discourse level, at no point should the narrator be confused with the author, although Melville's own experiences at sea mean he can be compared by literary critics, such as Baird (1966: pp.83-121), to Ishmael. Ishmael and Melville must be distinguished as completely separate entities. Using the cline given by Chatman (1987: 151), we can express Melville as the *real author*, and Ishmael as *narrator*. Two features on the cline, *implied author* and the *narrator* 'must... be distinguished' from each other as separate narratological entities (Prince 1987: 42). The implied author is 'the author's second self, mask or persona' and 'does not recount situations and events' (Prince 1987: 42). Ishmael's consistent use of the discourse level can make it hard to separate him, our narrator, from the

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implied author. The effect this has is to move Ishmael further along Chatman's cline towards the position of 'real author' which exists outside of the world of the text, thus increasing the sense of realism. In Plato's terms, Melville is using 'mimesis' (Genette: 162) as his text is constructed as the invisible imitation of another person. By reducing the overtness of Ishmael's fictionality his voice becomes more believable, lessening the distance between him and the reader.

The narrative mode of *Moby Dick* most resembles is that of *skaz*, a term introduced by Boris Eichenbaum, a Russian formalist, and is defined as; 'a pseudo-oral type of narrative discourse, the stylized imitation of the speech of an individual narrator' (Wales 2001: 361). Toolan defines *skaz* as having 'an audience implicit within the text' (134) as is the case in the extract which strongly implies an audience, but does not describe them. The extract never establishes a framed narrative that explicitly links Ishmael with a narratee present within the text world. Rather than a narratee – a receiver that is 'involved in or quite detached from the events of the story, who is *directly addressed* by the narrator.' (Toolan 1988: 79) – the audience is more closely aligned with the 'implied reader', to use Chatman's model. It can be argued that the receiver of Ishmael's narrative is an internal narratee but as no reference is made to suggest to the existence of this internal construct as an internal, defined character, it must be taken that the receiver is the implied reader. In addition to an implicit audience, *skaz* also requires 'indications of characterological dialect and pronunciation' (1988: 134). Although Ishmael uses Received Pronunciation, the extract does show evidence of characterological idiolect, for example, his frequent use of emphatic pauses; 'there they stand – miles of them – leagues' (1851: 2) and 'passengers get sea-sick – grow quarrelsome – don't sleep of nights – do not enjoy

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themselves much' (1851: 3). The repetition of this habit of pausing, indicated by dashes, in order to create dramatic emphasis demonstrates that Ishmael has a distinctive manner of narration. A further effect of these dashes and other punctuation used to indicate pauses is to change the pace of the text. For example, the combination of a dash and a semi-colon in, ';- no' (1851:3) indicate a longer pause that enacts the gap in speech where Ishmael stops to consider his words. By making the text dynamic by changing its tone and rhythm in this way, Melville replicates spoken language. Toolan goes on to align skaz with 'yarns' (1988: 134) which represent a more informal method of story-telling. By constructing *Moby Dick* in the fashion of skaz, Melville transforms the impersonal medium of the novel into something more closely aligned with the informality and spontaneity of the yarn, thereby diminishing the feelings of detachment and 'cut-offness' that can be experienced when faced with a novel the size of *Moby Dick*.

The use of the discourse level, aimed at a single receiver in attendance who has been identified as the implied reader, is such a strong feature of the extract that it cannot be disputed that Ishmael is using direct speech, despite the absence of quotation marks. This oral mode of narration, indicative of skaz, establishes a connection between Ishmael and the reader, and goes a great way to displace 'cut-offness' with the impression of potential interaction. The use of direct address, seen in 'call me Ishmael' (1851:1) and continued throughout the extract in instances such as the rhetorical question, 'what do you see?' (1851:1) demonstrates the narrator's awareness of his audience and his invitation to a dialogue. Toolan states that, as a reader, 'we stare at the narrator rather than interacting with him as we would as if we were in normal conversation with him' (1988: 3). Although this is correct and we cannot participate in the dialogue that Ishmael's addresses invite, the illusion of some form of interaction between the reader and narrator is created. Interaction



requires spatial and temporal proximity. As a consequence of this, a feeling of closeness is necessarily created. Ishmael's use of direct address, whether it is a commanding imperative or persuasive rhetorical question, suggests that he is a confident character who strongly desires to tell his story. His boldness and enthusiasm make him an attractive and engaging narratorial figure which assists in overcoming the distance between narrator and reader, because of the positive and active response he encourages.

The sentence structure of the extract also indicates the oral nature of the narrative, supporting the identification of the novel as skaz and decreasing the sense of distance between the participants. This can be seen in the use of multi-clausal, complex sentences:

'Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth [subordinate]; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November inside my soul [subordinate]; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses [subordinate], and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet [subordinate]; and especially whenever my hypos gets such an upper hand of me [subordinate], that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street [relational], and methodically knocking people's hats off [subordinate] - then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can [main clause].'

This part of the text can be described as digressional and reveals that the narrator deviates from the topic; an indicator of spontaneous nature of spoken language. This

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unusually long sentence is constructed of 89 words. Longer sentences are normally typical of written language but the simple methods used here to conjoin phrases imply the unprepared nature of spoken discourse. Eight clauses can be identified; six subordinate clauses and one relative clause before the main clause at the end of the sentence. The conjunctions (indicated in the passage in my own italics) are simple and repeated, indicating spoken discourse; three semi colons, three uses of 'and', three commas and one dash. This evidence would suggest that Ishmael is presented as speaking to us in the narrative present rather than being the 'author' of a pre-prepared written text. This would place us in close proximity to Ishmael in terms of time and location in addition to the proximity created by his informality. However, this sentence demonstrates Ishmael's narrative skill. The main clause, 'I account it high time to get to sea as soon as possible' is qualified by six subordinate clauses and one relative clause. The repetition and layering of sentences is a strong rhetorical device. If the story is indeed told to us verbally and spontaneously then it is, at the very least, rehearsed, pre-prepared, or Ishmael is an exceedingly skilled orator. This skill confuses critical perceptions of Ishmael. He introduces himself as, 'having little or no money' (1851: 1) and spends the duration of the novel in uneducated, working class environments, such as the dubious whaling ship *The Pequod*. However, he shows, through his discussions on science, philosophy and myriad other subjects, all conducted in this highly literary style, that he is an educated man. As shown in the extract, Ishmael gives very little away about his background. This ambiguity replaces the rather than more familiar introductions of first person narrators that provide the reader with a great deal of information about themselves. It could be suggested that this unknown quality about Ishmael creates distance between him and the reader. However, this mysteriousness is just as likely to make him more engaging.



There are other indicators of spoken discourse in the extract, all functioning to reinforce the suggestion that Ishmael is using direct speech to connect him to the reader. Colloquialisms and informalities such as, 'the watery part of the world' and 'high time' (1851: 1), suggesting relaxed spoken discourse. A further example of evidence to suggest spoken language are the hedges that feature in the text; '*If they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me*' (italics added indicate hedges). Here, Ishmael is attempting to make a statement of certainty. However, as he constructs the sentence, he continually modifies the strength of it demonstrating that Ishmael does not want to alienate his audience by offending them so is attempting to be less direct. In addition to placing the reader in close distal and temporal relation to Ishmael, the overall impression created by the cumulative use of language that indicates an informal manner of spoken discourse is to lessen the severity of the feeling of alienation that a reader may experience towards the imposing character of Ishmael.

In order to illustrate his argument, that all men share his longing for the sea, Ishmael creates an imagined version of Manhattan. This can be described, using text world theory, as a 'world-switch' (Gavins 2007: 79). In order to construct the world-switch Ishmael uses 'a combination of the world-building deictics' (Gavins 2007: 38). The use of deictics does, as Gavin says, build up a secondary imagined world in subordination to the first text world, but, because of our narrator's status as homodeigtic, we are orientated to Ishmael's perspective in our conceptualisation. Ishmael initiates this world-switch with the sentence; 'There now is your insular city of the Manhattoes' (1851:1). This deixis goes beyond simply orientating the reader to Ishmael's point of view, because the city of the Manhattoes, while not a fictional city,

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is not the 'current' location of the narrative and is therefore not a literal orientation. Ishmael is gesturing towards an imagined version of the city for the purpose of reinforcing his argument. Through the spatial deictic term, 'there', Ishmael gestures towards his fictional construction of Manhattan as if it was in sight. The temporally deictic 'now' suggests that we are looking at a present version of the city, creating a sense of immediacy. By continuing to use the present tense, such as in 'some leaning' (1851: 1), the scene is imagined as unfolding before us. After this depiction, Ishmael moves us back to the 'present', the first text world inhabited by the CN1, through the deictic, 'now' (1851: 3). This serves to orientate and focus the reader once more upon the discourse level of the text. By changing scene without moving the reader away from the perspective of the CN1 or the present tense which he inhabits, Melville maintains the closeness between reader and narrator. This prevents the objective detachment that would arise from moving the reader to different spaces and times, away from the CN1.

The sense of detachment and 'cut-offness' that Toolan claims is inherent to narrative texts is significantly negated by the use of skaz in the telling of *Moby Dick*. Spoken discourse necessitates the addressee to be both spatially and temporally in the same location as the addresser which reduces distance, as well as revealing information on Ishmael's character. By sustaining the present tense throughout, the reader is never moved away from Ishmael as narrator. Closeness to Ishmael decreases feelings of detachment from him, but closeness to his narrative, the infamous chase for the great white whale, has the potential to become exhilarating as the novel progresses.

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Appendix: Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (1851), pp 1–3

Chapter 1 Loomings

Call me Ishmael. Some years ago – never mind how long precisely – having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen and regulating the circulation. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos gets such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off – then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship. There is nothing surprising in this. If they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me.

There now is your insular city of the Manhattoes, belted round by wharves as Indian isles by coral reefs – commerce surrounds it with her surf. Right and left, the streets take you waterward. Its extreme down-town is the battery, where that noble mole is washed by waves, and cooled by breezes, which a few hours previous were out of sight of land. Look at the crowds of water-gazers there.

Circumambulate the city of a dreamy Sabbath afternoon. Go from Corlears Hook to Coenties Slip, and from thence, by Whitehall, northward. What do you see? – Posted like silent sentinels all around the town, stand thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries. Some leaning against the spiles; some seated upon the pier-heads; some looking over the bulwarks of ships from China; some high aloft in the rigging, as if striving to get a still better seaward peep. But these are all landsmen; of week days pent up in lath and plaster – tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks. How then is this? Are the green fields gone? What do they here?

But look! Here come more crowds, pacing straight for the water, and seemingly bound for a dive. Strange! Nothing will content them but the extremist limit of the land; loitering under the shady lee of yonder warehouses will not suffice. No. They must get just as nigh the water as they possibly can without falling in. And there they stand – miles of them – leagues. Inlanders all, they come from lanes and alleys, streets and avenues – north, east, south and west. Yet here they all unite. Tell me, does the magnetic virtue of the needles of the compasses of all those ships attract them thither?

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(...)

Now, when I say that I am in the habit of going to sea whenever I begin to grow hazy about the eyes, and begin to be over conscious of my lungs, I do not mean to have it inferred that I ever go to sea as a passenger. For to go as a passenger you must needs have a purse, and a purse is but a rag unless you have something in it. Besides, passengers get sea-sick – grow quarrelsome – don't sleep of nights – do not enjoy themselves much, as a general thing; – no, I never go as a passenger; nor, though I am something of a salt, do I ever go to sea as a Commodore, or a Captain, or a Cook. I abandon the glory and distinction of such offices to those who like them.