ABSTRACT

ZUPANCIC, ANTHONY EDWARD. The Quarterdeck: Leadership and Authority in Herman Melville. (Under the direction of Anne Baker).

This thesis examines the theme of leadership and authority in three of Melville’s works. America, in the 1840’s and 1850s, was struggling through the issues of slavery and western expansion and the resolution to both resided in the country’s leadership. Melville recognized the important role the nation’s leaders played in the development of the new county’s role in the world. He also realized the detrimental effect that weak or ineffective leaders would have on the nation and the people. In this thesis, I examine Melville’s ideas about leadership as represented in the novels White-Jacket and Moby-Dick, and in the short story “Benito Cereno.” My analysis does not demonstrate a progressive definition of leadership but instead shows Melville’s struggle with the concept of leadership and authority. Melville constantly struggled with the obligation to respect and adhere to authority and the moral responsibility of the people of a democratic country to be vigilant against tyranny and oppressive leaders. Even though Melville provides the reader with no clear model of leadership, he does, through his characters and narrative style, inspire a discussion about the relationship between the leader and the led and ensures that the people remember their role within that relationship.
THE QUARTERDECK: LEADERSHIP AND AUTHORITY IN HERMAN MELVILLE

by

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DEDICATION

To the officers, non-commissioned officers, and soldiers with whom I have served. Your unselfish devotion to the principals of freedom and the “rights of man” are an inspiration and your leadership is of the highest caliber. What I have learned from your example has made me both a better leader and a better person. Thank you.
BIOGRAPHY

Captain Anthony Zupancic was born in South Fayette, Pennsylvania in 1975. In 1997 he graduated from the United States Military Academy and was commissioned a Second Lieutenant of Armor.

In December of 1997, CPT Zupancic was assigned to A Company, 4th Battalion, 64th Armor Regiment, where he served as a Tank Platoon Leader. In December, 1998, CPT Zupancic deployed with his platoon as part of Task Force 3-15 Infantry to Kuwait as part of Intrinsic Action and in support of Operation Desert Fox. In August of 1999, Captain Zupancic assumed the duties of Adjutant, 4th Battalion, 64th Armor Regiment, a position he held until June of 2001. After attending the Armor Captains’ Career Course, Captain Zupancic assumed command of C Company, 2nd Battalion, 81st Armor Regiment.

After completing a Master of Arts in English and American Literature, Captain Zupancic will join the faculty at the United States Military Academy as an instructor in the Department of English. His awards and decorations include the Meritorious Service Medal, the Army Commendation Medal (with oak leaf cluster), the Army Achievement Medal, the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal, and the Global War on Terrorism Service Medal.

CPT Zupancic is married to the former Michelle Quinn of Hinsdale, New York.
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I would also like to thank my wife, Michelle. She has endured the trials of a military wife without complaint and has always helped me keep my job in perspective. I could not have accomplished all that I have without her.
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Introduction

This is a study of the theme of leadership in three of Herman Melville’s works: *White-Jacket*, *Moby-Dick*, and “Benito Cereno.” In the following pages, I will examine the intricacies of these works and provide an analysis of Melville’s concept of both the responsibilities of leaders and the duties of those who are led. Also, I will demonstrate how Melville portrays the complexities of leadership and authority and how he struggles with the ideas of compliance to authority versus rebellion against it. In *White-Jacket* we will see how Melville contrasts the qualities of natural leadership with a captain who commands by authority alone. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville complicates this distinction by introducing a captain who possesses both the authority of command and natural leadership qualities, but who leads his ship on a monomaniacal quest and to its doom. Finally, in “Benito Cereno,” he further complicates leadership by including the obscuring concepts of race and prejudice in the story. While the concept of leadership becomes more complex, the role of the led in Melville’s work remains unchanging: to obey, but continually question their leaders. This study is not a condemnation of authority or a glorification of leadership; as we shall see, Melville conveys the difficulties surrounding the identification of abused authority and misled leadership.

Before we set sail with Melville, however, it would be beneficial to understand why leadership is such an integral part of his work. At the time Melville was writing these tales, America was struggling with the confusion of a new national identity and purpose. As Alan Heimert claims: “Melville himself had been deeply involved in the
debate over many of the vexing questions of the 1840s.”¹ The two most prevalent political issues of the 1840s were the War with Mexico and slavery, and while most Americans understand the schism caused by slavery, fewer realize the debate surrounding the Mexican-American War.

President James Polk, in 1846, asked Congress to declare war on Mexico following an ambush of American troops north of the Rio Grande. Interestingly enough, the American forces were not attacked on United States soil but one hundred and fifty south of the traditional border between the United States and Mexico.² The Mexican War was a war of conquest with one goal: the acquisition of more land. As John Schroeder argues “Polk maneuvered to ensure war if necessary to gain his objectives … Polk’s was a militant policy designed not to resolve the outstanding issues like the claims question, but rather to use this dispute to achieve his territorial objectives.”³

Many in the United States believed the war was unnecessary and avoidable.⁴ Henry David Thoreau “denounced the Mexican War in his annual brush with Concord’s tax collector and refused to pay.”⁵ Melville even satirized General Zachary Taylor in sketches which “waver between affection and contempt – tonal incongruities that tell us something about his growing political confusion.”⁶ While Melville supported American expansion, he did not support the war or the fact that the war “was not so much making

³ Schroeder 9.
⁴ Schroeder’s book Mr. Polk’s War is an in-depth look at American dissent for the war. For an interesting literary corollary, see the “Operation” chapter in Melville’s White-Jacket. In this chapter, Melville describes an unnecessary and avoidable surgery.
⁵ Schroeder 38.
the world safe for democracy as for slavery.” The struggle between slave states and free states, more than anything else, defined the 1840s and 1850s. The issue of slavery permeated every aspect of American politics, including the Mexican War. The annexation of a new slave or free state would shift the balance of power to one side or the other. Despite the compelling moral objections to slavery, the government continually compromised in order to preserve the Union.

Melville, both a pacifist and an anti-slavery activist, would have viewed both the war and the continual appeasement of slave states with contempt. What was missing from the country was strong leadership. From 1845 until 1861, inadequate presidents led the United States. Not until 1861, in Abraham Lincoln, did the country find a leader of character and conviction who was willing to make a stand based on moral principles.

During the time Melville was writing these three works, he would not have been just questioning American politics, but also the political leaders. I am not arguing that Melville, within these works, attempts to question individuals. Instead, I argue that he is exploring the concept of leadership and authority and is struggling with the relationship between the leader and the led. In this brief historical introduction I am demonstrating why leadership is an important theme to Melville.

There is no better setting in which to explore leadership than on a ship at sea. While away from port a captain has complete authority over his vessel and crew. No one is permitted to question his orders, and as Melville says in White-Jacket, “it is not noon until he says so.” In this isolated, controlled environment, Melville finds a setting which allows a detailed analysis of leadership. In White-Jacket he begins this exploration by

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7 Delbanco 105.
8 For example, Heimert makes a compelling comparison between Ahab and John Calhoun.
comparing authority and leadership and their effect on the crew. He presents us with a captain who possesses the lawful authority of command but lacks natural leadership abilities. The crew, as represented by the narrator, continually questions the decisions of those who command through authority alone but obediently follow those characters who are able to capitalize on their natural leadership abilities as well as their limited authority.

Melville continues questioning leadership and authority in *Moby-Dick*. Instead of portraying leadership and authority in different characters however, he combines both into one: Ahab. Ahab possesses both the authority of command and the natural ability to lead people on whatever path he chooses. Ahab is a dangerous character, not only because of his madness, but also because of his ability to convince the crew to follow him on his vendetta. While in *White-Jacket* the narrator is able to maintain his individuality and objective view of his captain, Ishmael is over-powered by Ahab’s leadership and his individuality is abandoned to the mass consciousness of the crew. Ishmael finds himself a willing supporter of Ahab’s quest and silently disappears from the narrative, leaving the course of the story completely to the captain.

Melville changes his course in “Benito Cereno.” This short story offers an interesting contrast to the first two works by focusing not on the relationship between the leader and the led, but instead revolving solely around leaders. Melville abandons his first person narrator for the third person and chooses to deconstruct the leaders in the story. He shows the effects of racism and prejudice on leaders and leadership and systematically strips each figure of their authority. Even the law, with its racist tones, is left impotent, unable to provide any true answers. While the first two works reveal the
people’s responsibilities to their leaders, this last story demonstrates what Melville believes is one of the responsibilities of leaders to their people.
“Lord and Master of the Sun:” Leadership and Authority in Melville’s *White-Jacket*

While Melville’s *White-Jacket, or The World in a Man of War* may not have been initially popular with everyday readers, its critical nature elicited an almost immediate response from those it condemned. Three naval officers crafted responses to *White-Jacket*’s criticism of naval life and discipline. The first, written by Rear Admiral Thomas O. Selfridge Sr., was completed just four months after the novel’s initial publication in March of 1850.\(^\text{10}\) Admiral Selfridge writes:

> We have never known a work, professing as this does, to give a true picture of men and things, in which was to be found so many misnomers, misstatements, and inconsistencies – so many improbabilities, false premises, and false conclusions – so much of the marvelous and absurd.\(^\text{11}\)

Following this bitter introduction, the Admiral describes in great detail, and in extremely precise naval parlance, the inaccuracies of Melville’s description of life on a United States frigate. From correcting the author’s use of the term “selvagee”\(^\text{12}\) to defending corporal punishment in the Navy, Selfridge attacks every aspect of *White-Jacket*.

To incite such a bitter commentary, to make such an impact as to inspire a high-ranking naval officer to take the time to reply to a work of fiction, Melville’s novel must have included ideas that were alarming and threatening to many naval officers. *White-Jacket* critiques the naval “way of life,” traditions and regulations which Selfridge and his

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\(^{11}\) Anderson 125.

\(^{12}\) Anderson 127. Selfridge says “here he uses the qualifying word in place of the true term,” and informs the reader that this type of rope “is known by the name of nipper” Small technical details such as this, especially in a work of fiction, do not warrant the rage with which Selfridge responds to *White-Jacket*. The contempt in his response is directed at the more serious challenge of his and other officers’ authority.
peers had lived and supported their entire careers, and if this critique was correct, it endangered the power, authority, and validity of officers such as Selfridge. Melville explores the very nature of leadership within the world of the *USS Neversink*, and it is by that exploration that Selfridge and other naval officers feel threatened. Corporal punishment, traditional naval ceremonies, the sanctity of the quarterdeck all bestow upon the commander of a naval vessel absolute *authority*, a concept that provides a certain blanket of comfort for officers such as Selfridge. Deprived of those authoritative devices, Selfridge cannot understand how a commander would be able to maintain the discipline of his crew. He argues that without power to administer corporal punishment “the good men of the ship will perform all the labor. It is the fear of the lash that incites many to do their duty” and Selfridge draws the conclusion that without the threat of floggings “anarchy and insubordination would prevail.” The admiral does not see a distinction between leadership and authority. He does not recognize the true leadership as an effective way to maintain “peace, efficiency and order.” To him, there are only two tools used to command a vessel: fear and oppression through regulations and punishment.

The naval regulations and the strict hierarchical structure of the man-of-war are exactly what Melville continually questions in this naval narrative. *White-Jacket* is the first person account of a common sailor who ships aboard the United States Frigate *Neversink*. More importantly, as Priscilla Allen explains, the novel as the narrative of an

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13 Anderson 138.
14 I see Selfridge’s support of command by fear and oppression because of his reference to the crew of a man of war. For example, in a discussion about the actions of Midshipmen, Selfridge states that commanders “enjoin these gentlemen to deport respectfully towards their inferiors” (129). It is the term inferiors, used specifically instead of subordinates, which demonstrates the Admiral’s lack of respect for the common sailor. To him, and as we will see, to Claret, Cuticle, and other officers aboard the *Neversink*, the common sailor is an inferior life form, a mechanical part of the ship, who can only be controlled through fear of punishment and by a constant oppression (a continual reinforcement of their place as inferior).
ordinary seaman, is a subgenre of the autobiography, a form that allows for a more detailed examination of the relationships within the hierarchies and regulations aboard the ship. “The seaman spoke mainly of his life on the ship,” she explains, “it was his world” (33).¹⁵ The Neversink is White-Jacket’s world and his narrative takes the reader through every minute detail of that world, from mealtime to sleeping arrangements. But White-Jacket is not merely a description of the daily life of a U.S. Navy seaman aboard the Neversink; it is also a critical examination of those in positions of power. Each significant event during White-Jacket’s cruise is linked directly to the actions of one or more of the characters in power. Whether navigating through a gale off Cape Horn, lying in harbor, performing a play, passing the hours in the main-top, conducting an unnecessary surgery, racing an English man-of-war, or simply tacking ship, it is the actions and decisions of those in charge that concern White-Jacket the most.

Melville only allows us to learn of these characters through their actions. We begin to form opinions of them by the effects of their decisions and actions and not the motivation or rationale behind those decisions. We are confined, like White-Jacket, to the lower classes of the ship; we are not privileged to the confidence of the wardroom. But what we are permitted, what we do feel, is the pain, suffering, and humiliation of “the people.” We will look, in the following pages, at the actions of Captain Claret and Dr. Cuticle, two characters blanketed by the authority of the Articles of War and the hierarchy of the Navy and we will also examine the influential Jack Chase, a common sailor who inspires those around him through an almost mythic leadership.

Melville, through these characters and White-Jacket’s reaction to them, creates a significant distinction between authority and leadership. This distinction provides him with an idea of how to attempt to resolve issues of dissent and resistance within a system of control. By simultaneously describing the effects of leadership and authority on an individual (or individual crew) and demonstrating resistance to the latter and blind obedience to the former, Melville shows us that authority can be abused, and that abused authority can and must be resisted, while effective leadership can inspire unwavering loyalty.

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Selfridge’s Navy of the 1840s differed drastically from today’s Navy. The Articles of War, a set of regulations describing the crimes of a man-of-war and their appropriate punishments, governed the sailors. These articles originated as “an enactment by the Continental Congress of the ‘Rules for the Regulation of the Navy of the United Colonies’ on November 28, 1775.”16 These regulations, while amended slightly in 1799 and again in 1800, remained fundamentally unchanged until flogging was abolished in 1851.17 As Hershel Parker observes, a reading of the Articles of War to the crew was “designed to terrify a ‘novice’ standing in bareheaded awe as the captain’s clerk announced the specific grave offences for which a seaman might be punished.”18 A commander maintained the discipline of the crew and his own authority as commander

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17 United States Navy.
through the power granted him by these laws and through the public punishment suffered
by those who disobeyed these laws. For example, Article 3 specifies:

If any shall be heard to swear, curse or blaspheme the name of God, the Captain is
strictly enjoined to punish them for every offence, by causing them to wear a
wooden collar or some other shameful badge of distinction, for so long a time as
he shall judge proper.¹⁹

Articles 27 and 29 deem both desertion in the face of the enemy and any mutinous act
punishable by death.²⁰ Other articles discuss the punishments for theft, fighting,
drinking, sleeping on duty, and several other infractions, all punishable by court-martial.
Article 4, however, gives the Captain legal authority to administer up to twelve lashes at
his discretion.²¹ Flogging, therefore, was the most common form of punishment for most
offenses on board ship and was the punishment that Melville obviously critiques in the
pages of White-Jacket. As Parker explains, Melville himself “reluctantly witnessed, all
told, over a hundred and fifty floggings, each done according to ‘regulations,’” which
makes an averages of a flogging every two and a half days for Melville’s 382 day term of
service.²² Through its legal origins, authority remains a neutral characteristic; it is
neither good, nor evil, but merely a mechanism through which the commander maintains
control over his ship. However, once a captain abuses this authority, once he attempts to
increase or maintain his authority through oppression, authority gains a negative
connotation.

¹⁹ Naval Historical Center, “Rules for the Regulation of the Navy
of the United Colonies of North-America,” Naval Historical Center, ed. K. Lloyd, 18 Jan 2006, 26 Jan
²⁰ Naval Historical Center.
²¹ Naval Historical Center.
²² Parker 262. According to Parker, Melville’s cruise on the United States began on 18 August 1843 and
ended on 3 October 1844, a total of 382 days.
In addition to the legal power granted to the captain by the Articles of War, he also maintained authority through the physical structure of the Navy. In *White-Jacket’s* third chapter, only eight pages into the novel, the narrator describes the various hierarchies on board a man-of-war. “Were it not for these regulations a man-of-war’s crew would be nothing but a mob, more ungovernable stripping the canvas in a gale than Lord George Gordon’s tearing down the loft house of Lord Mansfield.”

The hierarchy provides order on board and that order, that understanding of one’s place, sustains the authority of superiors over their subordinates. Melville describes *White-Jacket’s* place by comparing the top-man with the other positions on the ship. Descending from the tops, each level of the hierarchy is described by their seamanship and importance on the ship. The top-men are “active sailors,” the sheet-anchor-men are “old veterans,” the after-guard are “the least sailor like of the crew,” and so the order descends as the positions descend from the heights to the bowels of the ship. Most importantly, “every man of a frigate’s five hundred strong, knows his own special place, and is infallibly found there. He sees nothing else, attends to nothing else, and will stay there till grim death or an epaulette orders him away” (8).

Melville’s choice of language here is significant. He equates the final, unconditional supremacy of “grim death” with the absolute authority of the officers over the crew. It may seem that these two forces, that of the black specter of death and the shiny, gold epaulette may both hold equal power over a seaman’s fate; however, as we will see, Melville takes this synonymous relationship between officers’ orders and death further when he discusses the insignificance of a crewmember’s life compared to an

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officer’s needs; the crewman can be ordered away from his post or he can die in the line of duty, either one a result of an officer’s order. The officer’s authority is supreme, governing both the life and even the death of the crew.

It is with his indictment of the practice that Admiral Selfridge so vehemently defends, flogging, that Melville makes clear the distinction between leadership and authority. Melville seemed to anticipate a response from Selfridge or officers of the same opinion. White-Jacket argues against the popular defense of flogging in the navy: “You swear that, without the lash, no armed ship can be kept in suitable discipline. Be it proved to you officers, and stamped upon your forehead, that herein you are utterly wrong” (147). He then cites an example that clearly distinguishes between the authority granted by the power to order the use of a “cat of nine tails” and true leadership. He describes the command of an English Captain, Lord Collingswood, who did not use the lash to maintain order in his ship. Moreover, he claims that the mere memory of the lash could not preserve the discipline which Collingswood maintained, but instead “some other influence must have been brought to bear; mainly, no doubt, the influence wrought by a powerful brain, and a determined, intrepid spirit over such a miscellaneous rabble” (148, my emphasis). With this example, Melville shows the difference between leadership and authority: leadership is an internal quality, that “determined, intrepid spirit,” while authority is derived from external sources, such as the Articles of War. While Melville is not insisting that leaders must choose between one form of governance over another, he does highlight that there is a necessary requirement for both leadership skills and the legal authority of command. Collingswood possessed both the legal authority from Her
Majesty’s Royal Navy and the necessary leadership attributes which allow him to rule without cruelty or oppression, without abusing his authority.

On board the Neversink, however, the fictional Captain Claret does not share Collingswood’s character or leadership skills, and thus he looks toward his authority alone to command his vessel. His authority begins with hierarchy. The captain maintains his authority over the ship and the crew by virtue of his position over all others, by the power imposed through the hierarchy. When that authority is threatened, for example, when White-Jacket is brought before the mast, Captain Claret must resort to another means to maintain his authority: fear through punishment. White-Jacket is arraigned before the mast precisely because he did not know his place within the hierarchy; he was not at his proper station when the order “All hands tack ship” was given, but more importantly, he figuratively challenged his place by appearing to deliberately disobey an officer’s order. He further challenged the captain’s authority by defying naval custom:

It is generally the custom with man-of-war’s-men to stand obsequiously touching their hat at every sentence they address to the Captain. But as this was not obligatory upon me by the Articles of War, I did not do so upon the present occasion, and previously, I had never had the dangerous honor of a personal interview with Captain Claret. He quickly noticed my omission of the homage usually rendered him, and instinct told me, that to a certain extent, it set his heart against me. (279)
Sentencing White-Jacket to lashes is the only recourse Captain Claret has to ensure the sailor knows his place, both figuratively and literally, and to maintain his own authoritative position.24

Authority relies on that understanding; it is dependent upon status and position. This is the reason Melville’s work was so threatening to Admiral Selfridge: it questions the very nature of authority and its easy transition to abuse. To officers such as Selfridge, naval regulations and traditions uphold, to the utmost, this unquestionable command. For example, the following observation from White-Jacket provides us with a glimpse of the arrogance those regulations may breed among those who hold the power of a captaincy: “It is not twelve o’clock till he says so. Perhaps no mortal man has more reason to feel such an intense sense of his own personal consequence, as the captain of a man-of-war at sea” (23). But this personal consequence, this “absolute command,” is derived from external forces; the authority is provided through the hierarchy of the ship, from the Articles of War, from the fear of punishment permitted by those articles, and to some officers, such as Captain Claret, from the abuse of that authority.

Captain Claret not only possesses the ultimate authority on the *Neversink*, but he also inevitably abuses that authority in frivolous ways. Melville uses Claret’s character both to demonstrate the nature of authority and to illustrate the meaningless manner in which authority can be abused. White-Jacket recounts several instances in which Captain Claret’s abuse of authority is not only unnecessary but causes the unwarranted suffering of the crew. In “A Man-of-War Race” Captain Claret calls all hands to help win a race with a British ship:

All hands being called, they were now made use of by Captain Claret as make-weights, to trim the ship, scientifically, to her most approved bearings. And thus we five hundred make-weights stood out that whole night, some of us exposed to the drenching rain, in order that the Neversink might not be beaten. But the comfort and consolation of all make-weights is as dust in the estimation of the rulers of our man-of-war world. (272)

This, perhaps, is one of the most critical passages concerning authority. Melville completely dehumanizes the crew with the phrase “made use of” and cold, technical language such as “make-weights,” and “approved bearings.” While Melville still refers to the vessel in the feminine, the crew literally becomes a part of the ship as ballast; they, by the end of the passage, are simply referred to as “make-weights” who are worth as much as dust to the officers.

The chapters “A Consultation of Man-of-War Surgeons” and “The Operation” reflect another type of authority and another abuse of that authority. Dr. Cuticle is a man obsessed with his own success and knowledge. He is the Surgeon of the Fleet and “had the name of being the foremost Surgeon in the Navy, a gentleman of remarkable science, a venerable practitioner” (248). In the hierarchy of surgeons, Cuticle possesses, by his position, the highest authority. In his request that the surgeons of neighboring ships consult with him on the case of a man who had been shot in the leg, we can see both his absolute confidence in his own authority and his desire to have others recognize that authority:

"In fact, there can be no doubt that the wound is incurable, and that amputation is the only recourse. But, gentlemen, I find myself placed in a very delicate\footnote{The title “Operation” itself implies a military action as well as a surgical procedure.}\)
predicament. I assure you I feel no personal anxiety to perform the operation. I desire your advice. Once more, let me say, that I feel no personal anxiety whatever to use the knife. (252)

He had obviously decided upon amputation as his course of action prior to the consultation. The “advice” he requires was not medical, but instead he was searching for a recognition of the authority of his medical knowledge. In agreeing with his course of action, the other surgeons would simply be acknowledging Cuticle’s power.

After receiving answers opposed to the amputation from three of the surgeons present, and continuing to maneuver his questions to elicit a positive response, he asks the youngest (and therefore likely the most easily intimidated by his authority) surgeon the same question. The answer, ambiguous at best, gives Cuticle the final validation and recognition of his authority:

Still, this is a very critical case, and amputation *may* be indispensable; and if it *is* to be performed, there ought to be no delay whatever…

“Surgeon Patella, then gentlemen,” said Cuticle, turning around triumphantly, “is clearly of the opinion that amputation should be immediately performed.” (254)

The unnecessary surgery occurs because none of the other doctors is willing to challenge Cuticle’s authority. He maneuvers his way into a position that allows him to proceed with the surgery, a situation that he intended from the beginning.

Melville continues to question the relationship between the welfare of the crew and the decisions and orders of the officers. While at anchor in port, the ships of the fleet perform basic functions in unison, at the command of the Commodore of the Fleet. These drills are meant to allow the Commodore a chance to command his fleet, a task
that does not occur very often. During these exercises, each ship’s officers attempt to outshine the others, a type of friendly competition. Victory is obviously claimed by the captain and other officers as a result of superior abilities of command. During a set of these exercises, under the rather harsh and unending encouragement of the First Lieutenant, a sailor falls from the rigging and is badly injured. Melville remarks of this incident:

Why mince the matter? The death of most of these man-of-war’s men lies at the door of the souls of those officers, who, while safely standing on the deck themselves, scruple not to sacrifice an immortal man or two, in order to show off the excelling discipline of the ship. And thus do the people of the gun-deck suffer, that the commodore on the poop may be glorified. (197)

Here we revisit the relationship between the epaulettes and “grim death.” The authority of the officers surpasses that of death, and even death hungrily awaits the sacrifice of a crewman at the whim of an officer’s orders. In these episodes, Melville is clearly working through the issue of abuse of authority. Although he recognizes the problem, he does not seem to offer a clear solution.

Melville does offer some evidence that these powerful external forces, while they maintain the appearance of order and discipline, have no relation to a commander’s ability to inspire in his crew the confidence to follow his orders without question. While the captain’s authority, in relatively peaceful situations, holds the crew in subservience, White-Jacket shows us the limitations of command that relies solely on these external forces. Caught in a gale off Cape Horn, the Neversink runs the risk of contradicting its name. With the situation critical, the ship’s company struggling with reefing sails,
Captain Claret bursts from his cabin and orders “Hard up the helm!” Immediately, Mad Jack, the officer of the deck, contradicts the captain’s order with “Damn you…hard down, hard down I say” (106).

“Contrary orders! but Mad Jack’s were obeyed” observes White-Jacket (106). The significance of this automatic compliance with Mad Jack’s orders is not a reflection of the two officer’s seamanship (for we can safely assume that Captain Claret, having served in the Navy and attained the rank of captain, has experience steering a ship through a storm), but an indication of the “people’s” confidence in the person giving the orders. “Every eye was upon him, as if we had chosen him from among us all, to decide this battle with the elements” (106). We do not know whether the ship would have been lost had the helmsman obeyed Captain Claret, but in the desperate situation, with their lives hanging in the balance, the crew decides to risk disobeying the ship’s supreme authority to follow a person in whom they had confidence and respect, a confidence and respect which come from Mad Jack’s competence and judgment, not from the authority granted to him as an officer in the navy.

This episode shows us that Melville considered leadership as derived from within the individual. In White-Jacket, he provides us with Jack Chase as an example of the penultimate leader. From his introduction, Melville describes Jack Chase as a person who inspires the others. “No man ever had a better heart or bolder. He was loved by seamen and admired by the officers; and even when the Captain spoke to him, it was with

26 It is interesting to note that Jack Chase was the real captain of the main-top aboard the USS United States, the ship on which Melville served. Naming this character (the novel’s shining example of leadership) on the fictional Neversink after a real person suggests a realness associated with leadership as contrasted with the artificiality of mere authority.
27 In the next chapter I will make a distinction between an effective leader and a “good” leader, but for the purposes of this chapter we are concerned only with the differences between leadership and authority.
a slight air of respect” (13). Not only is Jack’s character highly regarded among those
who know him, his seamanship is of the highest caliber as well. Just as with Mad Jack,
his competence is an integral part of his leadership. White-Jacket describes Jack as an
“oracle” to whom other sailors would come with their questions. He is able to lead, that
is, to be first, to set the example for others, through his superior knowledge and respect
for his profession. While his competence may be a necessary aspect of his leadership,
there are competent sailors who are not leaders, therefore, competence may be necessary
in a leader, but alone, it does not sufficiently make a leader.

Compared to the majority of others aboard the Neversink, Jack is a professional.
His stories of the Battle of Navarino are more than tales to pass the monotonous hours at
sea; they stir in the men a sense of pride and confidence. In his story, Chase is not the
hero but merely a sailor performing his duty:

“Why, my hearties, I did not do quite as much as my gun. But I flatter myself it
was that gun that brought down the Turkish Admiral's main-mast; and the stump
left wasn't long enough to make a wooden leg for Lord Nelson."

"How? but I thought, by the way you pull a lock-string on board here, and look
along the sight, that you can steer a shot about right--hey, Jack?"

"It was the Admiral of the fleet--God Almighty--who directed the shot that
dismasted the Turkish Admiral," said Jack; "I only pointed the gun." (319)

This passage shows how Jack maintains his personal connection to the sailors, another
necessary leadership trait. His humility allows him to maintain this personal connection.
He inspires the sailors by showing them the importance of their individual positions in
the world of the man-of-war and is therefore an example of his leadership abilities. We
must pause, however, on this passage for a moment and look more closely at Chase’s words, specifically the context of “God Almighty.” In the simple sense, his invocation of God may simply be an oath, similar in context to “on my honor” or “I swear it is true.” However, read aloud this passage also sounds as if Chase is equating the Admiral of the Fleet with “God Almighty.” If we read the sentence in this manner, we are able to see Chase’s the respect of the authority for those in command. Even if that authority is void of true leadership, noble Jack reminds the sailors of their duty to follow the officers in command. He not only demonstrates his own humility but also honors the Admiral.

In the Chapters The Pockets in the Jacket and From Pockets to Pickpockets, Melville describes the seedy crew of a man-of-war: men who consider their position merely a job, or men, like White-Jacket (and Melville) who enlist in the navy as a means to return to the United States. In the company of Jack Chase, however, one immediately feels the noble calling of service in the Navy:

I have sailed with lords and marquises for captains; and the King of the Two Sicilies has passed me, as I here stood up at my gun. Bah! you are full of the fore-peak and the forecastle; you are only familiar with Burtons and Billy-tackles; your ambition never mounted above pig-killing! which, in my poor opinion, is the proper phrase for whaling! (16)

Through his public ridicule of a whaler, Jack artfully instills pride in his fellow top mates. This speech appeals to a sense of fellowship similar to that invoked by Henry V’s “Saint Crispin’s Day Speech” in Shakespeare’s The Life of Henry V, in which Henry reminds his
starving, ragged band of soldiers that the noble cause in which they are involved outweighs the hardships and overwhelming odds they have endured.28

In his article “Antidemocratic Emphasis in White-Jacket,” Larry Reynolds argues that Jack Chase’s ridicule of Tubbs (the ex-whaler) and his strict attention to his men’s appearance suggests that Chase has aristocratic pretensions.29 The special standard of dress, however, as with the elevation of man-of-war’s-men over whalers, can be seen instead as a leadership technique used to inspire fellowship among his charge. Through fellowship and pride, Chase inspires his little band of men to perform their duties to the highest standard, to give their all every day, not from fear of authority, but through a desire to maintain the respect of their captain of the main-top. For example, during the harbor exercises, the First Lieutenant shouts “What are you ‘bout there, mizzen-top-men?30 D—m you, you are clumsy as Russian bears! don’t you see the main-top-men are nearly off the yard?” (195). Chase’s men are the best on the ship, led unwaveringly by their “gallant captain.”

Chase inspires in White-Jacket and the other members of the crew an unquestioning loyalty, but Chase’s leadership inspires others as well. The officers aboard the Neversink respect Chase and consider his advice. It is Jack who convinces Captain Claret to remit White-Jacket’s flogging sentence by speaking on the condemned man’s behalf. Jack Chase inspires the gun-room officers to “mingle with the people” and

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28 Notice the similarity with Jack Chase’s sentiments and those of King Henry: “We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;/For he that sheds his blood with me/Shall be my brother; be he ne’er so vile,/This day shall gentle his condition./And gentlemen in England, now abed, /Shall think themselves accursed they were not here;/And hold their manhoods cheap whilst any speaks/That they fought with us upon Saint Crispins Day” William Shakespeare, The Life of Henry V, ed. John Russell Brown, (New York: New American Library, 1988) 89. (My emphasis)


30 There are three masts on a frigate, the fore, main, and mizzen masts from fore to aft. The sails of the main mast are significantly larger and more unwieldy than those on the other masts, which makes the work of reefing and furling more difficult.
“confess a human brotherhood with them” during the Fourth of July theatrics. While in port, the captain of the main-top braves an audience with the captain to request a liberty for his shipmates.

To illustrate the impressive nature of Chase’s leadership, to demonstrate the importance of competence in institutions and to complicate ideas about authority, White-Jacket recalls a significant event involving the captain of the main-top. In the chapter “Jack Chase on a Spanish Quarter-Deck,” Melville describes the honorable Jack Chase’s desertion of the Neversink and subsequent enlistment in the Peruvian Navy.\(^{31}\) His leadership and competence is not overlooked, for when the Neversink moors alongside a Peruvian sloop, Chase is seen on the quarter-deck, in an officer’s uniform. He is more than capable of performing an officer’s duties. Once again aboard the US frigate, Captain Claret immediately reinstates him as captain of the main-top. The captain chooses not to adjudicate the offense\(^{32}\), but to instantly put Chase back to work because even Captain Claret understands that Jack’s leadership and skill are invaluable assets to the ship. Chase’s popularity among the crew includes even the isolated captain. Melville offers no evidence for why Claret chooses not to punish Jack Chase, but from his demonstrated leadership, we can infer that even Claret respects Chase so much that he cannot bring himself to punish him. Claret chooses to ignore the authority of the Articles of War and grant Chase a reprieve, suggesting that merit and capability prove, in this instance, more important than a demonstration of Claret’s authority. Chase is the

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\(^{31}\) The Peruvian Civil War (1842-1844) was ignited by Manuel Ignacio Vivanco, who assumed dictatorial power in 1843. “he ignored the 1839 constitution, failed to convene the Peruvian congress, and punished disloyalty with the firing squad. Beginning in 1844, opposition to Vivanco entered in southern Peru, where Ramon Castilla (1797?-1867) and others led armies in support of the former constitution.” “The Peruvian Civil War,” On War, ed. Ralph Zuljan, 7 March 2006 [http://www.onwar.com/aced/chrono/index1840.htm] choose Peruvian Civil War.

\(^{32}\) According to Parker, desertion was punishable by “death, or other such punishment as a court-martial should direct.” Parker 264.
Neversink’s “handsome sailor” and serves the ship and captain in no better manner than leading his main-top-men in their duties, as well as inspiring the rest of the crew to perform theirs as well.

We have examined the characters that abuse their authority and those who demonstrate innate leadership abilities. The true impact of these characteristics, and the power of White-Jacket, is found in the relationship between these characters and those they lead. Through the character of White-Jacket Melville demonstrates the effects of leadership and authority on “the people.” He is subjected both to the authoritative rule of the captain and to the inspirational leadership of Jack Chase. He is, as he claims, one of “the people,” since that is the name for “common seamen” in the “nomenclature of the quarter-deck” (28). He must be part of “the people” for us to feel the full effect of both leadership and authority. We must be able to identify with White-Jacket; we must feel for White-Jacket as one of the masses. Larry Reynolds disagrees with the idea that White-Jacket truly signifies “the people,” claiming:

White-Jacket maintains a double vision of and attitude toward the ‘people.’
When he views them in the ideal he sees and values their dignity and equality and willingly acknowledges a democratic brotherhood with them; when he views them realistically, however, he sees their depravity, vulgarity, and ignorance and feels a sense of superiority toward them.  

While Reynolds can argue that White-Jacket does not want to be “common” and instead hold the real “common man” in disdain, he does not account for White-Jacket’s real place in the ship. Although he may desire to be more, he is common, he too stands as a “make-

33 Reynolds 15.
weight” in the rain, he too is “brought before the mast,” he too eats last aboard ship.
Whatever his pretensions, White-Jacket sails as the common man, shares his hardships and his indignities, and is subjected to the same absolute authority as the rest of the crew.

Priscilla Allen explores, in great detail, the literary form of the common seaman narrative and the officer narrative. She concludes that Melville chose the seaman form specifically for its use of the man-of-war as a microcosm of the state:

The autocratic structure of the navy gave Melville the perfect representation of state power; it is autocracy which he portrays as harsh, ugly, and ruthless. The themes and modes of the body of seaman-narratives express a democratic protest against autocracy.\(^\text{34}\)

While White-Jacket’s narrative reveals the injustices of the absolute authority of an autocracy, I disagree that the novel, in its form or content, is merely an indictment of this autocratic power. Instead, Melville uses the personal connection of White-Jacket’s narrative to demonstrate influence of the individual on the “people.” Allen contrasts officer and seaman narratives by their subjects, stating that “The officer narrated mainly his travels, expanded with all sorts of geographic and scientific data on the places he visited. The wide world was his subject. The seaman spoke mainly of his life on the ship.”\(^\text{35}\) The confined, personal nature of the seaman’s account allows Melville to expose the personal relationships on board and to expose the effects of individuals on the whole.

Both leadership and the abuse of authority, Melville illustrates, are derived from and directly affect individuals.\(^\text{36}\) The seaman narrative, especially a narrative so involved

\(^{34}\) Allen 44.
\(^{35}\) Allen 32.
\(^{36}\) However, as we have seen through our discussion of naval traditions, abused authority can also be the result of a systematic acceptance of the status quo. An individual may have the predisposition to abuse any
and opinionated as that of White-Jacket, shows the power of leadership, as we have seen
Melville demonstrate through the character of Jack Chase. White-Jacket’s near
unquestioning devotion to Chase can be seen in nearly every word he writes about the
captain of the main-top. Titles such as “my noble Captain Jack Chase,” “my matchless
Jack,” and “that universal favorite, Jack Chase,” precede almost every description of the
sailor. It is directly through the subject of Chase’s leadership that we are fully able to
understand his power.

Similarly, it is through White-Jacket’s subjugation to the authority of Captain
Claret and the officers that Melville shows us how easily that authority can be abused.
Comments such as “neither Commodore or Captain honored the people with their
presence” (93), or “the people of the gun-deck suffer, that the commodore on the poop
may be glorified” (197) show the personal disdain for those in authority who do not care
for or concern themselves with the well-being of those in their charge.

Most importantly, however, White-Jacket’s frequent complaints and appeals to
the authority figures show Melville’s belief in the power of the people to enact change.
The oppressive nature of authority leads to this contempt and to a questioning of those in
power while blinding leadership maintains an unwavering devotion. Notice that White-
Jacket never once questions Jack Chase and in the tempest off Cape Horn, White-Jacket
gives thanks that Mad Jack was officer of the deck that night. He continually questions,
however, the decisions and actions of those officers who rely on and abuse their
authoritative positions. His letter to the Secretary of the Navy, albeit not an actual letter,
initiates White-Jacket’s attempts to challenge authority:

authority granted him, or, by the acceptance and perpetuation of out-dated and oppressive practices,
individuals may slowly find themselves unknowingly abusing their authority.
Mr. Secretary of the Navy, in the name of the people, you should interpose in this matter…. We beg you, Mr. Secretary, not to be swayed in this matter by the Honourable Board of Commodores, who will no doubt tell you that eight, twelve, and four are the proper hours for the people to take their Meals; inasmuch, as at these hours the watches are relieved… yet it is plainly detrimental to health; and in time of war is attended with still more serious consequences to the whole nation at large (30).

White-Jacket puts himself in the proper subordinate position by “begging” for intercession; however, he directly challenges the naval officer’s authority by discrediting the reasons the Board of Commodores would give for maintaining the current system.

He continues to challenge the use of authority by the irrational and incapable officers and the very laws that grant the officers their authority. He first claims the Articles of War are a relatively new code, and navies have operated in the past without such a code, concluding “that such tyrannical ordinances are not indispensable--even during war--to the highest possible efficiency of a military marine” (299). He continues his attack on authority by citing several articles and the frequent disregard of these articles by officers. Let us look at his indictment of Article XV as an example.

According to Article XV, "No person in the Navy shall quarrel with any other person in the Navy, nor use provoking or reproachful words, gestures, or menaces, on pain of such punishment as a court-martial shall adjudge (300)." White-Jacket then goes on to address all officers in the Navy, asking them how many times they themselves violated this law. He even specifically challenges his own Captain, claiming that he “repeatedly violated this law in his own proper person” (300).
White-Jacket confronts two types of authority in this exploration of the Article. First, he attacks the authority of the law itself, by implying its lack of authority over certain members of the Navy, namely the officers. Second, he is undermining the authority of the officers themselves. By demonstrating their disregard of the Articles of War, the very laws that grant commissioned authority, the officers have eroded their legal claim to authority. This is more than a complaint against one-sided laws, it instead undermines the very nature of authority.

What makes this challenge possible is White-Jacket’s experience of oppressive authority. The seaman narrative form, with its focus on life aboard ship, and the intricate involvement of White-Jacket within the narrative, allows Melville to explore the need for “the people” to resist this type of abusive authority. As with the doctors who disagreed with Cuticle’s desire to amputate the wounded sailor’s leg, or like Melville himself, who satirized the Mexican War, those who recognize abuse of authority must voice their concerns, reveal the weaknesses of that authority, and call for reform. This recognition, however, must begin with those who are affected by the authoritative force. That force itself will initiate the wave of reform that will destroy it. For Melville, as long as White-Jacket maintains his resistance, as long as he feels the effects of that abusive authority, and as long as he attempts to call attention to the injustices and bring about change, the Neversink will remain true to its name and continue its course home. If, however, he cannot recognize the danger, as I will show in the next chapter, the ship will go down.
Ahab’s Skill: Unwavering Obedience and the Power of Command

Published in 1851, a year after White-Jacket, Moby-Dick is Melville’s best-known and most successful work. The epic tale of the Pequod’s doomed voyage has inspired volumes of criticism and analysis. Scholars have continually discovered new and interesting interpretations of Melville’s masterpiece, from the cosmic relationship of man’s connection to the universe to the intimate relationships of individuals. In this chapter, I will examine Ahab’s command of the Pequod and how it relates to the welfare and best interests of the crew. Although this is a continuation of the leadership theme I analyzed in the previous chapter, in Moby-Dick Melville does not necessarily portray leadership in the same way as he did in White-Jacket. Melville complicates the idea of leading and following in Moby-Dick by presenting us with a captain who appears to possess the laudable qualities of a leader, such as those of Jack Chase, but applies those skills to a mad, suicidal quest. Melville relates to us the reality that not all leaders are virtuous; although those leadership characteristics that he praises in White-Jacket are desirable, they are also dangerous if used by the wrong person.

With Moby-Dick, Melville puts the question of authority astern and focuses specifically on the intricacies of effective leadership. While Claret’s command of the Neversink relied on the Articles of War, fear of punishment, and the hierarchy of the United States Navy, Ahab’s command of the Pequod is based more on a definition of leadership which Dwight David Eisenhower put forth almost one hundred years after the publication of Moby-Dick. General Eisenhower said, “Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because they want to do it.” Leadership,

37 Although not directly cited, I owe a great deal to Alan Heimert’s seminal work “Moby-Dick and American Political Symbolism,” which intricately links Moby-Dick with the political situation and personages of the mid-nineteenth century.
then, does not require the power of authority, but the art rests within the leader’s ability to convince people that the leader’s goals are their goals, that his or her quest is their quest. Melville has shown us an example of this leadership in the character of Jack Chase. He creates in Ahab a character who is able to fulfill this definition completely, who is capable of bending the collective will of his crew to his own indomitable will. But Melville does not stop there. His epic does not merely relate Captain Ahab’s ability to convince the crew to follow him on his vengeful pursuit of the white whale. As in *White-Jacket*, Melville, it seems, was as interested with the led as with the leader. In this chapter, I will argue that the responsibility of the *Pequod’s* disaster does not rest with the captain alone, but also with the crew. Through an analysis of Ahab’s leadership and the crew’s reaction to that leadership I will show Melville’s concern for the precarious relationship between those in positions of leadership and the objects of that leadership. Each has his own responsibilities, and ignoring those responsibilities, by choice or by ambivalence, will lead to a tragic end for all involved.

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In the last chapter, we examined those aspects of Jack Chase’s character that made him an effective leader. In this section, we will take a closer look at leadership, comparing Ahab’s character and actions with examples of readily recognizable leadership traits to attempt to answer the question which Nancy Klenk Hill poses, and a question which most ask with regards to the crew of the *Pequod*: “Why is this crew so readily swayed?” Hill argues that “their choice of risking doom while seeking dominance

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comes out of a single-minded desire for power and vengeance unmitigated by any other more humanizing concerns.” Hill’s argument is based on the premise that the “masculine community” of the Pequod is readily susceptible to a quest for power, and therefore, “Ahab can persuade them that … his enemy is also their enemy and … must be extinguished.” Hill’s claim puts little faith in the crew of the Pequod and also finds little significance in Ahab’s leadership. The question should be phrased, “How does Ahab persuade the crew to ‘follow him to doom’?”

Melville gives us our first impression of Ahab from the perspective of the part owners Captains Bildad and Peleg. They tell Ishmael that Ahab is “above the common” and that if Ahab speaks “you may well listen.” Besides creating a burning desire to meet Captain Ahab, Peleg and Bildad provide an air of authority through their appearance and position, by which we (and Ishmael) form our first impression of the Pequod’s captain. Ishmael first approaches Captain Peleg, whose features are defined by wrinkles which “must have arisen from his continual sailings in many hard gales,” because “his aspect seemed to have authority” (70). Delaying the physical entrance of Ahab and introducing him through the experienced figures of Peleg and Bildad forces us to consider him as a practiced, voyage-hardened authority on whaling. Most importantly, the owners inform the new crewmember that “stricken, blasted if he be, Ahab has his humanities” (79). In the analysis of Ahab’s leadership, we will start with these humanities. A leader “can get his subordinates to carry out orders through fear, but

39 Hill 6.
40 Hill 6.
never, under such conditions, will men give their all to a commander.”

In 1879, Major General John Schofield, a Civil War commander, commented on this same concept within his definition of discipline. Schofield stated:

He who feels the respect which is due to others cannot fail to inspire in them regard for himself, while one who feels, and hence manifests disrespect toward others, especially his inferiors, cannot fail to inspire hatred toward himself.43

John Bernstein observes, “there is no cruelty or brutality about the Pequod.”44 Unlike the captain of the Neversink, “Ahab shows a consideration of others almost unbecoming of a ship’s captain.”45 Bernstein attributes Ahab’s major humanities to his “relationship with Pip and Starbuck.”46 Ishmael records no floggings aboard the Pequod, nor does he relate any discontent with the living or sleeping conditions on the ship, which is a significant omission from the tale of a seaman.47 By excluding abuses that were common in seamen’s narratives, Melville depicts Ahab as apparently concerned for his crew.

Unlike the Commodore or Captain Claret, Ahab shares the hardships of the voyage with the crew. Once the Pequod is well underway towards the hunting grounds, the captain is “every day visible to the crew” (109). Although he had no purpose on deck, or as Ishmael observes, “he seemed as unnecessary there as another mast” (109), Ahab spends his days and nights with the crew, and by mere presence alone, displays to

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45 Bernstein 109.
46 Bernstein 109.
47 Although Ahab does have his cruel moments, for instance his verbal assault on Stubb, this is considerably different from White-Jacket’s near continual complaining about the life of an ordinary crewman, which would lead us to conclude Ahab’s command was significantly less oppressive and violent than Captain Claret’s.
the men their captain’s willingness to be a part of the brotherhood of sailors. When the call “There she blows! there! there! there! she blows! she blows!” (180) rings from the mast head, the ship springs alive with activity. The mates ready their boats for the chase, and Ahab’s opportunity to inspire his men by his example occurs. Flanked by his five “phantoms,” Ahab gives the order to lower the boats and “such was a thunder in his voice, that spite of their amazement the men sprang over the rail” (181). By lowering his own boat and giving chase to the whale, Ahab shows the crew he is willing to confront the same dangers that they face.

It is necessary to pause here and examine the introduction of Fedallah and the “phantoms.” It is possible to interpret the captain’s private whaleboat crew as a physical manifestation of Ahab’s inherent mistrust of the general crew. However, if we look closely at the timing of their introduction and their singular purpose, it becomes clear that Ahab uses this instance to solidify his leadership. With the restricted space aboard the Pequod and the limited shares of the profits, Ishmael explains that for Captain Ahab to have a boat actually apportioned to him as a regular headsman in the hunt -- above all for Captain Ahab to be supplied with five extra men, as that same boat's crew, he [Ahab] well knew that such generous conceits never entered the heads of the owners of the Pequod. (190)

The captain therefore smuggles the whaleboat crew aboard and it is safe to assume that these five men were not assigned any “lay.” It is also a safe assumption that the “phantoms” were hand selected by Ahab for the singular purpose to hunt and kill the White Whale. To call them out for “The First Lowering,” to expose them to the rest of the crew at this moment, then, serves to demonstrate to his crew Ahab’s determination
and resolve, and to inspire them through actions. Although the mates and crew are suspicious of Ahab’s whale-boat crew, the image of Ahab in chase of the whale has the appropriate effect. “Ahab was seen steadily managing his steering oar as in a thousand boat lowerings ere the White Whale had torn him” (183). He has inspired the confidence of his crew and it is, in part, this confidence that helps him convince the crew to hunt Moby Dick.

But ultimately, it is Ahab’s convincing attempt to give the crew purpose that persuades them to follow the captain blindly on his mission of revenge. We have seen that Jack Chase inspired his shipmates in their service to the country. His recalling of his adventures in battle, his elevation of man-of-war men over whalers, and his noble talk of service showed his mates the purpose of their service. Ahab’s theatrics on the quarter-deck serve the same function. After a fiery speech, and Starbuck’s questioning of seeking revenge against a “dumb beast,” Ahab shows Starbuck the power of his leadership:

The crew, man, the crew! Are they not one and all with Ahab, in this matter of the whale? See Stubb! he laughs! See yonder Chilian! he snorts to think of it. Stand up amid the general hurricane, thy one tost sapling cannot, Starbuck!…What is it more? From this one poor hunt, then, the best lance out of all Nantucket, surely he will not hang back, when every foremost-hand has clutched a whetstone? (140)

Ahab reveals two ideas to Starbuck in this passage. First, he equates the force of the crew, and therefore his hold over the crew, to the power of a hurricane. Now that the crew is “one and all” with him, nothing will be able to stop his quest. Second, he

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48 Theatrics is an apt word, even the chapter heading has stage directions: The Quarter-Deck (Enter Ahab: then, all.)
attempts to persuade Starbuck to voluntarily join in the quest. Ahab flatters the mate, calling him the “best lance in the Nantucket” and using Starbuck’s own logic, states “to but help strike a fin; no wondrous feat for Starbuck.” If the White Whale is nothing but a “dumb brute” then Starbuck should not be so resolved not to hunt the whale.

Ahab’s soliloquy in his cabin specifically reveals his intentions. “Twas not so hard a task. I thought to find one stubborn, at the least; but my one cogged circle fits into all their various wheels, and they revolve” (143). He capitalizes on the crew’s beliefs, making them believe that the white whale is the cause of all their sorrows and woes. Each crewmember sees in the whale an individualized icon, his darkest fears and hatred. Now, with each crewmember’s fear and hatred focused solely on Moby Dick, his purpose has become their purpose; they are hunting Moby Dick not for their captain’s vengeance but for their own.

In his complete control of the will of the crew, Ahab has been equated with a dictator and the ship as a totalitarian state. As C.L.R. James explains:

Melville pursues the method that he has laid down from the start in his analysis of Ahab. He is by nature a dictatorial personality. But he has not made him a dictator. It is the fact that he has been in command so long, has learned the usages of command at sea which all tend toward creating a dictatorship. Give him now his purpose, and you have the basis of what Melville calls the “tremendous centralization” of power.⁴⁹

While it is true that even Ishmael continually uses terms like “dictator,” “king” and “master” to describe Ahab, James’ explanation omits the basis of Ahab’s power: his leadership. Ahab does not rely on those aspects of power which we normally associate

with dictators. As we have seen, he manipulates the crew to believe they want to follow him. To talk of dictators is to recall the command of Captain Claret, a command based solely on the authority of fear and absolute power. Ahab chooses not to order his crew to commit to the chase, but convinces the crew of the importance and necessity of the chase. Ishmael permits us to see the reasoning of the crew for following Ahab:

I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs; and stronger I shouted, and more did I hammer and clinch my oath, because of the dread in my soul. A wild, mystical, sympathetic feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine. With greedy ears I learned the history of that murderous monster against whom I and all the others had taken our oaths of violence and revenge. (152)

There is no dissent in Ishmael’s recollection of his feelings about the whale or the captain. He does not fear or question the captain’s motives; nor does he hint at any concern for offering a dissenting opinion. Instead, his words resound with a commitment to Ahab’s purpose. He repeats three times his oath to destroy the White Whale and confirms the solidarity of the crew in their resolve to destroy Moby Dick. His words are not those of a subject of a dictator, but instead reflect the attitude of a person inspired to purpose by an artful leader. The “‘tremendous centralization’ of power” of which James speaks is not derived from Ahab’s dictatorial personality but instead from his power to understand the crew and to convince them into blindly and obediently following him.

Only Starbuck remains wary of Ahab’s quest and does not accept his captain’s leadership. The first mate continually disagrees with the captain and challenges his decision to follow the White Whale. We must briefly examine the two facets of
Starbuck’s dissent, the first being his persistent mental opposition to the captain’s quest and the second being his abstinence from any action which would inhibit the doomed chase. Wynn M. Goering argues that Starbuck’s actions are predetermined by his religion. Goering introduces the Quaker concept of nonresistance by quoting from the *Testimony of Friends*:

> So far as the requisition of government do not violate their conscience, they [Friends] are bound to obey the laws of their country … believing it to be their religious duty, to demean themselves with proper *respect and submission to those who are placed over them*.\(^{50}\)

Although requiring submission to authority, Quaker thinking does address the manner in which a Quaker can protect himself: “‘No weapons of self-defense will, on the whole, be found so efficacious as Christian meekness, kindness, and forbearance.’”\(^{51}\) This, and Divine Providence would protect the Quaker from evil. His disagreement with Ahab’s monomaniacal quest and his nonresistance are both a result of Quaker thinking. Goering explains:

> Starbuck responded the only way a true Quaker could. His job is to hunt whales, and those are the terms he has been offered; thus Starbuck is bound to submit peaceably to the laws of his government (in this case, Ahab), while renouncing the “corrupt bargain” Ahab has made with the rest of the crew.\(^{52}\)

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\(^{50}\) Wynn M. Goering, ”‘To Obey, Rebelling’: The Quaker Dilemma in *Moby-Dick,*” *The New England Quarterly* 54.4. (1981): 519-538. (my emphasis)

\(^{51}\) Goering 530.

\(^{52}\) Goering 533.
In other words, Starbuck, due to his moral and spiritual beliefs, has no choice but passively to accept Ahab’s authority as captain of the *Pequod*.\(^53\) He is incapable of taking the action needed to save the *Pequod* and her crew.

That action, in short, would be mutiny. Melville gives us two examples of mutinous acts in *Moby-Dick*, reminding us that this rebellion exists as an option (with however slight a chance of success) aboard whaling vessels. Both the *Town-Ho* and the *Jeroboam* suffer through mutinous acts, the former a result of unnecessary cruelty and the latter at the instigation of a madman. The mutiny on the *Town-Ho* is based on the cruelty of an officer. After refusing to obey an order (an order given solely out of spite), Steelkilt, the ringleader of the mutiny, strikes the first mate, breaking his jaw. Recognizing the injustice of a punishment for the offense, several crewmen join Steelkilt in his refusal to work until the captain concedes to not punish the Lakeman. The significance of the *Town-Ho*’s story is that the mutiny does not succeed. One by one, the sailors give up their resistance until the perpetrators are all caught and the three hold-outs are flogged. The failure results from a lack of conviction on the part of the crew, but still, a powerful match sparks the mutiny: cruelty.

The *Jeroboam*’s mutiny results from a more complex set of circumstances. The sailor who calls himself Gabriel holds the crew under a power much the same as Ahab’s control over the *Pequod*’s crew. Ishmael tells us “so strongly did he work upon his disciples among the crew, that at last in a body they went to the captain and told him if Gabriel was sent from the ship, not a man of them would remain” (252). His power over the crew gains strength when a sickness infects the ship. Gabriel’s claim that the plague

\(^53\) Here we see an interesting correlation between Starbuck and Jack Chase, both with the power to lead and both with an almost unquestioning respect for authority.
“was at his sole command; nor should it be stayed but according to his good pleasure” is akin to Ahab’s claim that he will lead the *Pequod’s* crew to the glory of killing the White Whale (252). The mystical and spiritual nature of both Ahab’s theatrical blessing of the blades and oath taking on the quarter-deck and Gabriel’s claim of power over the plague hold their respective crews in awe and solidify their positions of power. The *Jeroboam’s* captain has no choice but to submit to Gabriel’s control of the ship.

And so, it seems, Starbuck must submit to Ahab’s control over the *Pequod’s* crew. The mate ever increasingly recognizes Ahab’s madness, and throughout the novel grows more assertive in his dissent. When the oil in the hold begins to leak, Starbuck makes his most outward display of rebellion.

“Captain Ahab,” said the reddening mate, moving further into the cabin, with a daring so strangely respectful and cautious that it almost seemed not only every way seeking to avoid the slightest outward manifestation of itself, but within also seemed more than half distrustful of itself; "A better man than I might well pass over in thee what he would quickly enough resent in a younger man; aye! and in a happier, Captain Ahab.” (362)

In the captain’s refusal to repair the leaking oil and save the profits of the voyage, Starbuck finally recognizes the extent of Ahab’s obsession. His defiance of the captain in this passage shows Starbuck’s commitment to the welfare of the crew and the voyage, but it also reinforces Starbuck’s unwillingness to defy the captain’s authority. He still approaches Ahab with “respect and caution,” a reminder that he remains true to his Quaker beliefs, and informs the captain that if he were not the commander of the vessel,
that he (Starbuck) would defy him outright. Starbuck is hindered, again, by his religious convictions that prevent him from defying authority.

However, Melville also justifies his inaction by the examples of the *Town-Ho* and *Jeroboam*. Ahab does not command the ship through cruelty, as we have seen. In fact, he maintains a consideration of his crew that is unlike most commanders. On the *Pequod*, there is no apparent cruelty that would fill the precedent of the *Town-Ho*. Ahab maintains his illusory concern for the crew by conceding to “up Burtons” and fix the oil leak in the hull. Although he is not concerned for the profits seeping away in the hold, he preserves the semblance of good will. And Ahab himself has already conducted a mutiny in *Jeroboam* fashion. He has effectively taken the ship over for his own purposes.

Although he is captain of the ship, he still is responsible to the owners to use the ship in the manner and for the purpose it was commissioned, in this case, to bring to Nantucket as much whale oil as possible. He has, as Gabriel did on the *Jeroboam*, captured the crew, turned them from the owners, and convinced them that his purpose is the only purpose. Starbuck recognizes the captain’s mutiny when Ahab tells him:

> Let the owners stand on Nantucket beach and outyell the Typhoons. What cares Ahab? Owners, owners? Thou art always prating to me, Starbuck, about those miserly owners, as if the owners were my conscience. But look ye, the only real owner of anything is its commander; and hark ye, my conscience is in this ship's keel. (362)

Ahab’s words reveal an undeniable truth: that the only person in control is the person in control. He has disregarded the owners, taken control of the vessel for himself, and has autonomy because the crew has granted him that power. The owners are as insignificant
as Captain Mayhew of the *Jeroboam*, whose orders are drowned out by the very sea on which he commands.

Starbuck cannot incite a mutiny; he cannot take control of the ship nor convince the crew to aid him in this endeavor. Starbuck recognizes Ahab’s claim that all the crew is with him: “What! hope to wrest this old man's living power from his own living hands? Only a fool would try it?” (387). Mutiny is not an option. His one opportunity to save the crew and the ship presents itself in the form of a musket. Starbuck, however, cannot violate the law or his beliefs. He asks himself, “But if I wake thee not to death, old man, who can tell to what unsounded deeps Starbuck's body this day week may sink, with all the crew!” (387). Even to save his own life, the first mate cannot bring himself to challenge the authority of the law and his own religious convictions. He cannot murder Ahab in cold blood, and as he walks out of the cabin so does the salvation of the *Pequod*.

I have mentioned that Wynn Goering analyzes Starbuck’s Quakerism as a major aspect of his character. Goering provides an excellent analysis of Starbuck’s strict adherence to the Quaker religion, but what he does not explain is why Melville gives Starbuck this staunch religious conviction. Goering claims that the entire ordeal is a “trial of Starbuck’s fidelity to his Quaker code.”54 I argue that Melville has a more significant purpose for Starbuck’s devotion to his God and religion. As we have seen, there were no other options to save the *Pequod* because of Ahab’s control over the crew. This places Starbuck in a situation where he has no alternative; he cannot lawfully take control of the ship, the crew would not permit this, and his strict adherence to his faith

54 Goering 535.
and beliefs prevent him from eliminating Ahab. Melville purposely denies Starbuck the option of killing Ahab, and by doing so, also relieves Starbuck of the culpability for the disaster of the *Pequod*. As with Starbuck, the ultimate responsibility for the tragedy does not lie fully with Ahab either. Melville makes clear that, however strong, however charismatic, however powerful Ahab is, he is also mad. His quest for vengeance is born from madness and because of this we cannot attach the full amount of blame. He does not intentionally lead the *Pequod* into the maelstrom, but instead, in his mind, is leading the ship on a just and righteous quest.

If complete responsibility for the doomed vessel does not lie with these two figures who so obviously have the power to avert the *Pequod’s* fate, then we must search elsewhere for that responsibility. Now, we can examine the possibility that the crew, as a whole, carries much of the responsibility for the disaster. By giving the crew this responsibility, as we will see, Melville makes his most profound comment on the relationship between leaders and the led. It is not in the leaders that responsibility lies, but in the led. While we put our faith and trust in those we choose to follow, the ultimate responsibility for our safety and welfare lies with us. As Ishmael considers his choice to go to sea, he states:

> Finally, I always go to sea as a sailor, because of the wholesome exercise and pure air of the forecastle deck. For as in this world, head winds are far more prevalent than winds from astern…so for the most part the Commodore on the quarter-deck gets his atmosphere second hand from the sailors on the forecastle. He thinks he breathes it first but not so. In much the same way do the

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55 Goering also reiterates the Quaker belief in non-violence: “Friends must exercise ‘Christian forbearance and patience, that violence and bloodshed’ not ensue.” 529.
commonalty lead their leaders in many other things, at the same time the leaders little suspect it. (21)

This passage sets the tone for Ishmael’s narrative. In claiming he goes to sea as a sailor instead of an officer, he relates his narrative to that of White-Jacket. Melville sets the narrator up, from the beginning, as a reflection of the commonality, one of “the people.” We therefore take his actions and decisions as an indication of those of the rest of the crew. Ishmael fixes responsibility to the commonality. In this philosophic recollection we see the idea that just as leaders have a responsibility to the commonality, so do the people have a responsibility to police their leaders. “Many other things” indicates that the crew must continually monitor their leaders and question their motives and decisions in order to ensure the welfare of all.

In *White-Jacket*, we have seen that this monitoring of leaders is automatic when the leader relies on authority alone to command. The oppression and cruelty used by leaders like Captain Claret and Dr. Cuticle instills almost an involuntary compulsion to question. Melville shows us in *Moby-Dick*, however, that the people may have a more difficult time questioning an effective and charismatic leader. Ishmael never once questions the quest for the White Whale. Instead he, as a true disciple of Ahab, finds himself hating Moby Dick as much as any man aboard. Ahab’s charismatic leadership affects Ishmael as it affects the rest of the crew. Ishmael relates that “it was the whiteness of the whale above all things that appalled” him (159). Ishmael goes to great lengths to examine and explain the science of whales and whaling. His classification of whales in “Cetology” is characterized by technical language and form. His description of the dissection and conversion of whale blubber into oil is filled with mechanical terms.
that portray the whale as an object of commerce and profit. In most of his descriptions of
the animal, Ishmael maintains a respectful, yet indifferent attitude. The whale, it appears
to Ishmael, is a “dumb brute,” and while a noble creature, is nonetheless the object of a
lucrative and productive industry. However, under Ahab’s influence, Moby Dick
becomes more. The narrator’s hatred of the White Whale due to its simple color is a
testament to Ahab’s ability to shape the crew’s perception and emotions to such an extent
that “the White Whale [became] as much their insufferable foe as his” (158). Moby Dick
becomes more to the scientific Ishmael; the whale becomes the object of extreme
loathing.

With his confession that within himself burned a hatred of Moby Dick as strong
as that of Ahab and the rest of the crew, Ishmael succumbs to the solidarity of the
voyage. From the moment the narrator gives himself “up to the abandonment of the time
and the place,” he incrementally disappears from the novel. In the opening chapters we
are introduced to a narrator much like White-Jacket, a narrator with an individual identity
and individual thoughts. From the very first line, Melville presents the narrator as a
strong, independent person: “Call me Ishmael” he asserts. In the following chapters,
Ishmael gives us an opinionated account of the characters of the novel, the logistics of
preparing for a whaling voyage, and the life of a Nantucket sailor. Once he accepts
Ahab’s quest, however, once his “shouts go up with the rest of the crew,” that
independent narrator slowly fades into the mass consciousness of the rest of the crew.
Melville allows Ishmael to disappear, and by doing so, denies the reader and the crew the
opportunity to resist the captain. Without a critical crewman, like White-Jacket, the
ship’s company are hopelessly lost, blindly following their leader to doom.
Charles Foster argues that *Moby-Dick* is “a social tragedy in which the crew share the guilt and punishment of their captain and in which even the innocent, even something of heaven like the skyhawk Tashtego nails to the mast as the ship sinks, must go down.”

Foster, in this passage, assigns guilt to two parties, the crew and the captain. Ahab’s guilt, however, is mitigated by his madness; it is possible to attribute a large share of the culpability to the crew. The crew, as a whole, must accept the appropriate measure of responsibility. It is their failure to see the truth of Ahab’s madness, even in the face of his effective leadership, that determines their fate. By choosing to follow Ahab, and to follow him unquestioningly, symbolized by the disappearance of Ishmael as narrator, the crew errs in turning their individual and collective power of their self-determination over to the monomaniacal captain.

Melville uses the microcosm of the *Pequod* to demonstrate both the dangers of effective but misled leaders as well as the responsibility of the led to take responsibility for their own welfare. As Thoreau comments in “Resistance to Civil Government:”

> The mass of men serve the State thus, not as men, mainly, but as machines, with their bodies….In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stone…They have the same sort of worth only as horses and dogs. Yet such as these are commonly esteemed as good citizens.

Ishmael echoes this passage in *Moby-Dick*, before he completely disappears from the novel. When contemplating Ahab’s quest and the captain’s control of the crew Ishmael

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states, “To accomplish his object Ahab must use tools; and of all the tools used in the shadow of the moon, men are most apt to get out of order”(177). The crew, in blindly following Ahab, are only tools and “have the same sort of worth as horses and dogs.”

Thoreau reminds us of our duty to our fellow citizens and ourselves: “All men recognize the right of revolution; that is the right to refuse allegiance to and resist the government, when its tyranny or inefficiency are great and unbearable.”

Melville creates a microcosm of this tyrannical and inefficient government, representatively populates it, and demonstrates the relative ease with which a single, charismatic, strong-willed person is able to capitalize on the ignorance of this responsibility. The entire company of the *Pequod* ignores the responsibilities entrusted to them. Ahab ignores his duty as captain of the ship and the crew disregards their fundamental right to revolt against tyranny. The imminent fate of the ship and her crew ultimately can be attributed to the crew alone, a crew easily and readily swayed by effective leadership.

Melville’s analysis of leadership in *Moby-Dick* shows us the danger of leadership unchecked. Ahab’s effective leadership creates an atmosphere aboard the *Pequod* in which the only person who questions the captain has no options to avert the disaster. The crew is ultimately punished, not for their participation in Ahab’s quest, but their disregard for their responsibility to see the evil and madness in the quest and their failure to rebel against the tyranny. In the final chapter, we will see how Melville complicates the ideas of leadership and authority further. In “Benito Cereno” Melville seems so frustrated with inadequate leadership that he systematically strips each leader of his authority, and even challenges the ultimate secular authority: the law.

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58 Thoreau 229.
Empty Scabbards: The Tragedy of Misguided Leadership in “Benito Cereno”

In *White-Jacket*, Melville introduces to his readers despotic, oppressive officers and a willful, independent narrator. On the *Pequod*, he creates a charismatic, strong, and effective leader and a tough but easily manipulated crew, one of whom is the narrator himself. The events surrounding the meeting of the *Bachelor’s Delight* and the *San Dominick* in “Benito Cereno” provide an apt ending to this study of leadership in Melville’s work. In the past two chapters, we have examined the nature of leadership and authority and those subjected to their effects. We have seen Melville’s carefully constructed works lead us to a conclusion that while leaders maintain a power over their subordinates, the latter must realize that they possess the true power. Melville has demonstrated the need for “the people” to recognize the potential perils of blindly following a leader and their responsibility to remain vigilant to that danger and be prepared to rebel against that abuse.

In “Benito Cereno” Melville gives us the rebellion that he has so convincingly portrayed as necessary in his previous works. The slave revolt aboard the *San Dominick* embodies all that a rebellion should be; it is a resistance against tyrannical and oppressive rule, a struggle against the injustice of slavery, or as Carolyn Karcher claims, “the ultimate triumph of the intelligent will to freedom over the blind forces of oppression.”59 However, in form and tone, “Benito Cereno” differs significantly from the other works we have studied so far. In this short story, Melville does not allow the reader intimate knowledge of “the people.” He uses a third-person narrator instead of his normal first-

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59 Karcher, *Shadow* 129.
person seaman narrator, which denies us a clear understanding of the catalyst for the revolt. We cannot, as readers, identify fully with the slaves as we do with White-Jacket or even Ishmael, because we are not granted access to their thoughts and motivations. Although the average reader can infer their revolt occurs because of their situation as slaves, the narrative style of the story lessens our sympathy for the rebels. Instead, the focal point of Melville’s story is its leaders. While *White-Jacket* and *Moby-Dick* demonstrate the effects of leadership on “the people,” “Benito Cereno” reverses the dynamic and demonstrates the effects of rebellion on leaders. Melville, however, does not provide us with the relatively clear distinction of leadership in this story as he had in the past two works. “Benito Cereno” has an ambiguous tone. While *White-Jacket* is an obvious attempt to inspire change, and *Moby-Dick* inspires us to question leaders even when they effectively convince us of a course, “Benito Cereno” leaves the reader with no clear message; it is shrouded in the same gray mist that surrounds the *San Dominick* as the story opens.

While our analysis of the story will revolve primarily around leadership and those characters in leadership positions, it is impossible to discuss “Benito Cereno” without discussing race. Melville masterfully weaves the issues regarding race so fully into the framework of the story that a discussion about leadership must include the topics of race and racism. There are volumes of criticism that discuss the question of race in “Benito Cereno,” and while we will touch on it here as well, this chapter will not be another analysis of exclusively race and slavery. Instead, I will demonstrate how Melville uses both race and racism as significant attributes of leaders in this story. Delano’s racism and Babo’s race themselves help define the effectiveness of their leadership.
Thus I will not limit this analysis to the scope of racism and race. Although these attributes are significant limitations of the characters, Delano, Babo, and even Benito Cereno demonstrate traits of good and effective leadership. What the ugly appearance of racism does, however, is limit the leaders to such an extent that their leadership and authority become almost insignificant. Cereno loses control of his ship and never sails again, Delano jeopardizes his crew and ship because he is incapable of recognizing a threat, and Babo, whose motives are noble and just, fails to lead his fellow slaves to freedom and loses his own life. The only authority which remains steadfast and unwavering is the impersonal power of the law. Through its narrative structure, its ambiguous tone, and its leaders who are “flawed” by race and racism, “Benito Cereno” reveals the complex nature of leadership and authority and demonstrates the difficulty in determining the effectiveness and integrity of leaders.

First, let’s examine the significance of the narrative form of the story. Karcher explains that:

we can identify the body of the narrative as Captain Delano’s version of the San Dominick’s ordeal, the deposition as Benito Cereno’s, and the few pages of the narrative at the end that set these versions against each other and focus for the first time on the slave ringleader Babo as Melville’s.  

The first part, which Joyce Adler aptly suggests “might be entitled ‘Delano’s Misconceptions,’” leads the reader through a hazy tour of the San Dominick. Delano cannot discern anything clearly. Melville introduces us to the rebel ship through the

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60 Karcher, Shadow 129.
“deception of the vapors,” and tells us that Delano could not determine “what she was about.” Melville’s use of the third person narrator in this part of the story allows him to keep the reader in the fog as well. As Darryl Hattenhauer explains, “the reader is a slave to the narrator’s version of reality, a version of reality marked by indistinct objects, vague boundaries, and absence.” Melville’s use of free indirect discourse here has a significant effect on the reader. Because we are only given Delano’s thoughts and experiences aboard the San Dominick, we find ourselves continually frustrated by the narrative. The fog that surrounds the slave-ship also surrounds the American captain, who cannot recognize the actual shapes through the mist of his misconception. Melville traps us in the fog of this free indirect discourse and we beg to be released from Delano’s authority in the story. We as readers understand and want to see through the fog, but remain subjected to Delano’s blind, prejudiced authority. This helps the reader to form an opinion of his competence as a captain. Our growing frustration makes us question his leadership. The more authorial power Delano gains from the narrative style, the less apparent authority he has as a character. His incompetence as a narrator translates into a perceived ineptitude in command. Delano’s inability to read people or understand his

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surroundings is the mark of a poor captain. Melville forces us to question his leadership by limiting our experience on the *San Dominick* to his thoughts.

Besides creating a question of Delano’s leadership, the third-person narrator also omits a significant characteristic of Melville’s other stories: there is no “I” to assume any type of responsibility in the story. In *White-Jacket* the narrator continually challenges his leaders’ decisions and their regulations, an action which is an assumption of responsibility for his own welfare. As we have discussed, in *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael, as narrator, slowly disappears into the novel, and with him also fades his personal culpability for the disaster. If the “I” disappears, then so does that individual responsibility. In “Benito Cereno” the “I” does not exist. The narrator is completely detached from both the injustice of slavery and the violent revolt that results from that injustice. In addition, the narrator is removed from the actions of the leaders in the story and therefore individually feels no effect of their actions. In this way, the narrator is not relegated to a subordinate position, but instead is free to describe the events objectively. Not subjected to an oppressive and abusive commander as was White-Jacket nor under the influence of a charismatic and willful leader like Ishmael, “Benito Cereno’s” narrator can comment on and at the same time avoid the oppressive command of Don Benito and the violent rule of Babo and Atufal. However, Melville traps this supposedly omniscient narrator in the confines of Delano’s narrow view of the world. The narrator remains lost in the fog as well.

With the capture of Babo and the end of the slave rebellion, the narrator conspicuously disappears from the story. To reestablish order, the narrator must relinquish his power to the ultimate authority in this story: the courts. It is as if even the
narrator cannot determine which side was in the right in this struggle, nor which leader he would follow, and so abandons the story to a legal deposition. The deposition, along with marking the author’s surrender of authorial power, symbolizes the Spanish captain’s final abandonment of authority and his ultimate escape from culpability. The courts “ordered the captain of the ship San Dominick” to appear and testify (239). Cereno, in whom “was lodged a dictatorial power beyond which, while at sea, there was no earthly appeal,” must obey the order of the court and through his compliance, his authority is completely usurped (171). The captain who, even while apparently defeated by the rebel slaves, mustered enough strength of will to leap into Delano’s boat, bows to the authority of the court and recalls the terrifying ordeal of the slave revolt. His complete surrender is marked by the narrator’s observance that the “silver-mounted sword, apparent symbol of despotic command, was not indeed, a sword, but a ghost of one” (258). Melville’s choice to translate Cereno’s story into the legal jargon of a deposition relieves the captain of his culpability. In the entire deposition, Cereno is only named once, in the first paragraph. In the rest of the document, he is known only as “the deponent.” He is un-named in the events of the story, and yet the shadow of the revolt ultimately blots him out.

The un-naming of Cereno in the deposition is an interesting contrast to the first section of the story. In the first part of the narrative, only five characters are named: Delano, Aranda, Cereno, Babo, and Atufal. In these names, we naturally look to find the responsibility for the cause of the slave revolt (Aranda and Cereno), the responsibility for the execution of the rebellion (Babo and Atufal), and the credit for the final suppression of the insurrection (Delano). In the deposition, each of these is named, along with thirteen other slaves and twelve Spanish crewmen or passengers. With an identity
comes a partial culpability. Only Cereno, the captain and character with overall responsibility for his ship, escapes this culpability through his un-naming; the quid pro quo, however, is that along with the culpability, Cereno relinquishes the last bit of his authority.

The previous analysis of the narrative form of the story provides us with an initial interpretation of the complex issues Melville brings to light in this story. Through the story’s structure, Melville begins to strip Cereno and Delano of their authority as commanders, and now we can move into a more detailed analysis of Babo and Delano’s leadership and their flaws, and to continue to question their authority. The slave rebellion occurs for the same reason Jack Chase deserts the Neversink: the rights of man. A mutiny against a tyrant is exactly what Melville called for in White-Jacket. Yet, some critics do not find the nobility and righteousness of the gallant captain of the main-top in the leadership of Babo. Kermit Vanderbilt argues that Melville recast “in Babo and the blacks, the crime of Hawthorne’s Ethan Brand and Chillingworth, who commit the ‘unpardonable sin’ of heartless mastery over their brother-man.”64 As Sidney Kaplan argues, to Delano and Cereno, Babo and his slave followers are nothing but “malign evil.”65 If we, for a second, agree with these critics and disregard the noble motive of a slave rebellion, and indeed try to see the slaves as “ferocious pirates,” as Cereno does,

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then within Babo’s actions and through his silence, we can discern the effects of the rebellion on Babo the leader.

The limited information we have concerning Babo comes from the slave himself, and although Delano’s entire visit aboard the San Dominick is shrouded in a fog of lies and deceit, we can safely assume that some of Babo’s statements concerning himself are true. For example, Babo explains that he, “in his own land, was only a poor slave; a black man’s slave was Babo, who is now the white’s” (183). All of Babo’s lies play a specific part in his elaborate ruse. He appears to gain nothing from relating this information to Delano, however. It is safe to assume, then, that this statement is true, since it appears to have no significance within his web of lies. We can use this information to examine the effects of Babo’s sudden accession to a position of authority on his actions as leader of the rebellion. After taking control of the San Dominick, according to Cereno’s deposition, Babo systematically begins to execute those who had perpetuated his slavery. In an Ahab-like act of vengeance, he orders two Ashantee rebels to murder Don Aranda on deck, and in his [Babo’s] presence. Babo then disposes of the body of his former master in an unknown manner, the only remains being his bleached skeleton, mounted on the prow of the San Dominick with the words “Follow your leader” inscribed below.

Those words, “Follow your leader,” may at first appear as a warning to the remaining Spanish crew. Below the skeleton of Aranda, they serve as a warning to the remaining whites, a statement with the connotation Sic Semper Tyrannis. However, this implies that Aranda was a leader, and in fact he was not. Aranda was merely supercargo, accompanying his shipment of slaves aboard the San Dominick. Other than from the
master-slave relationship, he possessed no authority onboard the vessel. Instead, we must look at these words as referring specifically to Babo himself, as an inspirational message to his fellow slaves. This statement, posted under the corpse of their former owner, serves to encourage the slaves aboard the ship to obey Babo. He has killed and displayed their former master, he has usurped the power, and if they follow, he will lead them to freedom.66

The most specific instance of Babo’s use of his newfound authority comes in the famous shaving scene. Not only is the scene interesting because it shows Babo’s complete authority over Don Benito, but also because Babo is able to maintain that authority in an apparent subservient role:

Not unaffected by the close sight of the gleaming steel, Don Benito nervously shuddered, his usual ghastliness was heightened by the lather…. Altogether the scene was somewhat peculiar, at least to Captain Delano, nor, as he saw the two thus postured, could he resist the vagary, that in the black he saw a headsman, and in the white, a man at the block. (214)

Many critics have commented on the images of both physical and psychological torture within this scene. Cereno’s heightened pallor and the image of executioner and condemned coupled with the use of the Spanish standard as a shaving bib all reinforce Babo’s complete control over the Spanish captain. Many critics use this scene to continue the theme of Delano’s obtuse view of blacks. H. Bruce Franklin observes that “he [Delano] is a prisoner of his own racist, imperialist, authoritarian, and even sexist

66 Several critics argue that Aranda’s murderers ceremonially ingested his flesh, thereby appropriating his power for themselves. For an interesting article on cannibalism, see Sterling Stuckey, “‘Follow Your Leader’: The Theme of Cannibalism in Melville’s ‘Benito Cereno,’” Critical Essays on Melville’s “Benito Cereno,” ed. Robert Bukholder (New York: G.K. Hall, 1992).
However, this scene also demonstrates not only Delano’s naiveté or even Babo’s total control of the situation but Babo’s abuse of his new-found authority. Cereno, by this point, is a beaten man; he has no choice but to completely surrender to Babo, a fact of which the slave reminds the Spaniard as the razor is at his throat: “And yet master knows I never yet have drawn blood, though it is true, if master will shake so, I may some of these times” (215). But instead of being content, Babo uses his now realized power to exact his vengeance on the white man. The lure of this power over another man is too tempting for a person who has been subjugated for so long. While Babo is able to lead a revolt in the name of a just cause, while he is able to inspire his fellow slaves to fight for their own freedom, he is not able to resist the compulsion to abuse his acquired authority; instead he finds a sadistic pleasure in using it. A razor to the throat and constant reminders may have been enough to keep Cereno acting his part, but Babo allows the razor to slip, cutting Cereno’s neck. Delano catches a glimpse of the effect, stating that “no sword drawn before James the First of England, no assassination in that timid king’s presence, could have produced a more terrified aspect than was presented by Don Benito” (215).

Although Babo uses violence and intimidation to ensure his control over the ship and its crew, and although he may at times abuse his new authority, Babo is not evil. Joyce Adler argues, “Babo does not act out of innate evil and without motive. Babo’s purpose … is to get the black slave group … to a ‘negro country.’” She goes on to provide evidence that the killings aboard the ship served this purpose. It is not Babo’s purpose that is evil; it is not his resistance to oppression; it is not even his brief surrender

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68 Adler 88.
to the intoxication of power that ultimately makes his attempt at leading the revolt unsuccessful. Babo has the potential to be a Jack Chase, a noble, righteous leader. Only one significant factor differentiates the potential of the two leaders: Babo could never succeed because of the nineteenth century perception of the African race. While Jack Chase avoids punishment from deserting his ship, Babo feels the full force of the law, and is executed for leading a revolt.

It is here that Babo’s silence makes the final comment on his leadership. Once captured, once the slave rebellion has been put down, Babo refuses to speak. Brook Thomas rightly claims “that silence makes Babo the most difficult character to assess, a difficulty compounded because Babo’s power is so great that he silences Don Benito.”69 The silence is difficult to comprehend because we are not given an opportunity to identify in him any reasons deserving of compassion. He does not defend himself at the court in Lima. “Before the tribunal he refused. When pressed by judges he fainted. On the testimony of the sailors alone rested the legal identity of Babo” (258). In his silence we see his final attempt at leading the ongoing rebellion. He understands the futility of trying to defend his actions and his silence marks his contempt for the authority of the unjust laws of slavery. The courts compel Don Benito to testify, usurping the last of the captain’s authority; Babo, however, is able to maintain his authority by refusing to speak. An attempt to defend himself in the white court would signify his recognition of the unjust authority of the slavery laws. By remaining silent Babo is able both to maintain his authority and challenge the court’s authority. In doing so, Babo remains the leader of

the rebellion; he continues to fight, in the only way he had left, against the oppressive powers of the institution of slavery.

While Babo is able to retain his authority through silence, it is silence which, in part, marks Cereno’s loss of authority. A captain’s authority is derived, to some extent, from his ability to give orders and have those orders carried out. Babo effectively strips Cereno of this ability, creating, in place of the commanding officer of a Spanish vessel, a puppet, a mouthpiece for his own orders. Cereno only acts the part of captain, following Babo’s carefully scripted theatrics. When Cereno appears to try to convey his own thoughts, the slave quickly silences him and speaks in his stead. For example, when Delano asks about the voyage around Cape Horn, and Cereno begins to falter, Babo interrupts with “‘master told me never mind where he was, or how engaged, always to remind him, to a minute, when shaving time comes’” (210). As with the narrator, the control of voice and silence marks a control of authority in the story. Only Babo is able to use this control to manipulate power.

Babo is able to control the authority in the story, but our only discourse on leadership comes from Delano. The American captain continually makes observations concerning the leadership aboard the San Dominick. To Delano, the apparent misery and disorder aboard the slave ship are a direct reflection of Cereno’s leadership. He initially considers Cereno “a paper captain…a commander who has little of command but the name” (179). As discussed earlier, Melville, by frustrating the reader through Delano’s inability to see through the shadows, deliberately discredits the captain. We are angered by the dim-witted captain’s unending misconceptions. However, his observations on Cereno’s command, when taken individually, reveal a captain who understands how to
command a vessel. He recognizes the difference between an effective commander and one who merely holds the title, and in the same scene he shows us that he, at least aboard the *Bachelor’s Delight*, sees himself as an effective commander. He tells Cereno, in response to an act of violence he has just witnessed, that aboard his ship “instant punishment would have followed” (179). Delano recognizes the need for discipline aboard a ship and attributes the chaos aboard the slave ship to Cereno’s weak leadership.

After listening to the story of the misfortunes of the *San Dominick*, Delano attributes “at least part of the detentions both to clumsy seamanship and faulty navigation. Eyeing Don Benito's small, yellow hands, he easily infers that the young captain had not got into command at the hawse-hole but the cabin-window, and if so, why wonder at incompetence” (177). While this appears to be merely a criticism based on Cereno’s appearance, we are able to identify those traits that Delano values in a commander and therefore those which he likely possesses. Instead of learning the art and science of seamanship through experience, either as a subordinate officer or seaman, Delano believes the ineffectiveness of Cereno’s captaincy is a result of his obtaining the command by his aristocratic position or wealth. Delano, however, does possess the experience of a seasoned sailor. He continually questions the uncommon calms Cereno describes, and he meticulously surveys the *San Dominick’s* weather-beaten and disorderly appearance.

When the wind begins to blow, Delano automatically begins giving orders to pilot the ship into safer waters:

Snatching a trumpet which hung from the bulwarks, with a free step Captain Delano advanced to the forward edge of the poop, issuing his orders in his best
Spanish. The few sailors and many Negroes, all equally pleased, obediently set about heading the ship toward the harbour. (224)

His orders are obeyed immediately and the entire ship’s company dutifully follows his instructions. Even Babo takes the helm. From his criticism of Cereno’s seamanship and his demonstrated ability to direct the crew of a vessel, Delano appears to be an excellent commander. The crew of the Bachelor’s Delight provides even more evidence of this, instantly executing his orders to bring precious food and water to the slave ship. Delano appears to have the knowledge, sailing skills, and requisite discipline which make a fine captain; however, being aboard the San Dominick brings one completely damaging flaw out of the American.

Our frustration with Delano is derived from his inability to understand the situation aboard the San Dominick. This inability, as countless critics have claimed, comes from his inherent racism. Adler argues, “though he is not a slave owner himself, he shares the master mentality in regard to the nature and purpose of black people. They are to him at first like delightful animals.” His prejudices run deeper, however, than just black and white. His conceptions of Cereno swing from his apparent “ill breeding” or “low born” status to his association with the once great Spanish empire. Delano sees Cereno as more than a metaphor for faded Spanish power; instead he views Cereno’s impotence as a result of Spain’s weakness. Spain has lost its power in the world, and therefore, to the American, Cereno cannot maintain his authority on the ship because he is a Spaniard. To Delano, the San Dominick’s sorry state is a consequence of Cereno’s poor leadership, and this, in part, is a result of Cereno’s nationality.

70 Adler 84.
What Melville accomplishes here is very significant. He places an otherwise effective commander into a situation where his racism directly affects his leadership, and in doing so, shows the inherent dangers of racism. Delano would not intentionally put his crew or ship in danger. However, blinded by his racism, he leads his ship and crew into a very dangerous situation. He considers the blacks “too stupid” to organize a rebellion and cannot even imagine “a white so far a renegade as to apostatize from his very species almost, by leaguing against it with negroes” (201). His racism converts what would normally be good judgment into a false sense of security. He is reduced from his role as leader by his racism, and, as we have already seen, his inability to understand the situation (again, a result of his racism) continually lessens his authority.

Just as Delano’s leadership and authority are affected by his racism, Cereno’s physical command of his vessel is ultimately usurped because his judgment is affected by race. He believes Aranda’s claim that “no fetters would be needed for his negroes,” and allows them to “range within the given bounds at their pleasure” (175). Cereno, Aranda, and Delano all do not believe the slaves are smart enough or organized enough to pose any threat. While it may seem odd to claim that allowing slaves relative freedom is racist, I am not arguing that chaining the slaves below deck would erase their racism. I am merely suggesting that their view of blacks as simple-minded, unorganized sub-humans who are incapable of revolt, and the false sense of security they feel because of this manner of thinking, is racist. These two captains and one slave owner, otherwise competent in their duties and commands, allow their racism to sway their treatment of the slaves aboard and as a result betray their ultimate responsibility as leaders: their crews and cargo.
In “Benito Cereno,” Melville takes the theme of leadership and authority in a different direction than we have discussed in the past two chapters. In both *White-Jacket* and *Moby-Dick*, Melville has shown us the relationship between those in command and those subjected to command. We have seen that individual authority is derived from two aspects: the legal authority granted to a captain and a more intangible authority that comes from natural leadership. Captain Claret possessed the legal authority, Jack Chase an authority from his leadership, and Ahab possessed both the official power of a captain and the power of a charismatic leader. Melville has questioned that authority, he has challenged it and shown the need for “the people” to resist an abuse of that authority; however, not until “Benito Cereno” has he taken that authority away from the leaders. Claret, however oppressive and ruthless his command of the *Neversink* was, still retained his power, and Ahab, despite his monomania, maintained his command of the *Pequod* until she sank. In “Benito Cereno” however, each of the leaders we have discussed is, in some way, stripped of his role as leader. Delano progressively loses credibility and authority as the reader becomes more frustrated with his obtuseness. Babo, while he is able to maintain some authority through his silence, is removed from his position as leader of the rebellion and is put to death, and Cereno surrenders his position as captain and yields what remaining authority he has to the courts at Lima.

Obscured in this cloud of derelict leadership, one authority appears to rise above all others to restore order. The law provides the final authority in the story and, ironically, it is the one power not attributed to an individual. Melville turns his attention from individual leaders, the ultimate example of democratic responsibility, by allowing the courts to determine the outcome of the story. The law is a direct reflection of the
people; it is an authority that no one person can individually challenge. To understand what would convince Melville of this fact one need only look to the decisions of his father-in-law, Lemuel Shaw. Brook Thomas explains:

Prior to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Shaw went out of his way to find loopholes in the existing Fugitive Slave Act of 1793…Shaw never transgressed what he saw as the letter of the law. When the 1850 law tightened the loopholes which allowed him to decide in favor of blacks, he saw no recourse but to decide as he did.\footnote{Thomas 118.}

Melville witnessed his father-in-law compromise his moral objections against slavery because he had a higher moral obligation as a judge to uphold the law. Even though Shaw believed that the institution of slavery was immoral and unjust, his power was limited to the laws prescribed by the people of the United States. The authority of the law seems to transcend all, and even the almost unlimited power granted to the captains of vessels must yield to the power of the law.

But even in the law, Melville does not provide resolution to the story. The courts fail in their primary responsibility of determining the truth. Babo’s silence, his contempt for the law, denies the deposition any validity. Instead of discovering the truth through legal inquiry, the deposition provides merely another narrow view of the events on board the \textit{San Dominick}. Confined to Cereno’s version of the truth, the deposition, and therefore the decision of the courts, cannot provide a truly accurate account of the revolt. Melville calls into question the very institution which his father-in-law was forced to uphold, and in doing so, undermines the authority of the law.
Melville constructs the leaders in this story in order to destroy them. He purposely illustrates how racism can define and destroy an otherwise competent leader. He also shows how those aspects of the individual leader are impossible to change. Adler aptly claims: “Delano has dismissed from his mind the brief thought that slavery might be the basis for all that has happened on the San Dominick.”72 The American captain has learned nothing, nor have the events that he witnessed diminished his racism or changed his conception of blacks. He will be forever confined to his narrow view of the world.

With the leaders stripped of their authority, with their obvious inability to change as individuals, and with the apparent final authority of the law challenged, Melville questions those absolutes that we associate with leadership and authority. The story begins with a ship shrouded in mist and the end obscures the entire story in a perfectly constructed veil of unanswered questions. In White-Jacket and Moby-Dick Melville emphasizes the need for us continually to question our leaders; in “Benito Cereno” he succeeds in doing just that. Through systematically stripping the leaders in the story of their authority and deconstructing the apparent all-encompassing power of the law, Melville explores the fragile nature of leadership and authority, but as with the deposition at the end and contrary to the narrator’s claim, does not provide us with “the key to fit into the lock of complications which precedes it” (255).

72 Adler 85.
Conclusion

When I began this study I was hoping to show a progression in Melville’s work concerning leadership. I was looking at leadership as a theme on which Melville continued to work and develop or an idea that he attempted to define and classify, as Ishmael was apt to do. I thought perhaps Melville would successively build on a definition of leadership, providing us with, in the end, a model on which he believed leaders should be based. What I found in these works was something quite different. It appears, in *White-Jacket*, Melville did engage with the idea of leadership as a personal quality that some possess and some do not. He wrestles with the concept of those who lack leadership qualities but are in positions of authority and compares them with those who do not necessarily possess a legal authority to command but nonetheless inspire those around them to follow. Melville complicates this idea in *Moby-Dick* by combining these two forces, charismatic leadership and legal authority, into one character. It would follow that Ahab is the leader Melville was looking for in *White-Jacket*; but he is not. Instead, Ahab demonstrates the dangers of the leader Melville searched for in *White-Jacket*. Instead of showing a progression in the definition of a leader, Melville merely creates a different type of threatening leader.

In Babo, I thought I would find a model of good leadership; but again, Melville thwarted my search. Although Babo leads a rebellion against tyranny and oppression, those same forces prevent him from achieving the title of good leader. He is black, and therefore, in the nineteenth-century, white, western world, could never be the model for leadership. Melville ensures we understand this by Babo’s capture and execution. Instead of exalting Babo’s leadership, Melville attacks the authority that prevents him
from becoming that which he should be. The systematic destruction of Delano’s, Cereno’s, and the law’s authority in the story shows Melville’s contempt for the shortsighted views of racists. “Benito Cereno” provides the most complicated commentary on leadership. Unlike the first two works, Melville does not concentrate on the relationship between the leaders and led, but instead on the individual flaws of the leaders alone. He demonstrates contempt for leaders and unjust power in this short story by taking away their authority and leaving us only impotent emblems like Aranda’s skeleton or Cereno’s empty scabbard.

Instead of finding a model for leadership I found something more significant: a subject for debate and commitment. I have shown Melville’s concern with the role of the people in these works, and it is through these works he hoped to impress upon them their responsibility to control their own destinies. In a time when he recognized the need for strong leadership, Melville attempted to guide people into a discussion of the same. His portrayal of leaders in these works is not an attempt to tell people what makes a good leader, but instead acts as a means to allow citizens to make their own decisions about leadership. Melville offers us no clear answers in these works about leadership, but instead provides his readers with a context in which they could individually try to come to terms with leadership and authority. In a time when, once again, the questions of national leadership and authority were on most citizens’ minds, Melville’s works show their relevance. It is the responsibility of individuals to appreciate the complexities of leadership and to actively participate in their own governance. It is up to all individuals to ensure that the leaders they follow are the right ones.
Works Cited


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