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Never Sink: Lessons from White-Jacket's Man-of-War World

Ayla Johnson

In the wake of Donald Trump's surprise victory over Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election, millions of American youth have lost their innocence to disillusionment. Faced with disparities between idealized values such as equality and the harsh realities of American prejudice many have responded in shock, anger, and fear. A popular meme on social media depicts the following sentiment: "9/11 was the worst day in America. 11/9 was the second worst day." Despite its hyperbolic nature, the words express a terror not easily shaken. The question seems to be "where do we go from here?" In times like these, as recognized by Thoreau, it is imperative to look to the past in order to "find out, not what was, but what is. Where a battle has been fought, you will find nothing but the bones of men and beasts; where a battle is being fought, there are hearts beating..." (Matthiessen 346). Fortunately for us, America's beating hearts have been encapsulated within the pages of her literature. If we are to rely on history to inform our present predicament, then we must turn to that great American Renaissance writer who delved deeper into our darkness than all the others; the one who understood "beyond the bright circle of man's educated consciousness lay unsuspected energies that were both magnificent and terrifying" (Matthiessen 358). We must look to the man of war himself—Herman Melville.

At the time he wrote *White-Jacket: or The World in a Man-of-War* America was on the brink of civil war. Ideals of freedom clashed with the realities of slavery and unsavory experiences in the US Navy left Melville disenchanted with the government. Due to similarities between then and now "it seems appropriate to reexamine *White-Jacket* with an eye on its origin and meaning in its own time and a concern for the work's relevance in ours" (Fisher 593). A sociopolitical analysis of Melville's man-of-war microcosm reveals government corruption, as well as disparities between reality and ideals of egalitarianism, patriotism, and Christianity, which have always been congruent with both our past and

present. However, this need not be our future. Just as the man-of-war is symbolic of American society, White-Jacket is symbolic of the disillusioned youth. Like him, we too can overcome our disenchantment with pacifism and baptism into our shared humanity. For the purposes of this essay, these central themes and their corresponding lessons have been divided into the following subsections: Descent, Disparity, and Deliverance.

I. Descent

Enthralled by the American Dream, many fail to see the American nightmare. Often overlooked is the ugly truth that corruption, greed, and discrimination are as much a part of our national identity as opportunity, equality, and liberty. Melville was one of the few who recognized this dichotomy. In *White-Jacket*, he explores our descent into evil via his favorite literary tool: ship as the allegorical microcosm of society. Hidden within this quasi-autobiographical tale of his time spent in the Navy aboard the *USS United States* are hard truths about American civilization that are still salient today.

One of the primary concerns of the book is the inequities between various classes and the ways in which uneven distributions of power breed corruption. The American class system is represented by the Navy's hierarchy in which commanding officers are at the top and regular seamen, collectively called *the people*, are at the bottom. The genius of the man-of-war microcosm is that it uses "the vehicle of militarism and war to tell us that we live in a world, or at least in a society, that depends on war or conflict or competing interests between its constituent groups as the procedural means for maintaining political advantage and social equilibrium" (Fisher 595). The only way that equilibrium can be maintained is through the strict observance/acceptance of the hierarchy/class system. On the *Neversink* (fictionalized version of the *USS United States*), Captain Claret represents government authorities. He wields ultimate power over *the people* and he alone decides between life and death, liberty or imprisonment. He controls when his subordinates eat, drink, sleep, pray and smoke. His power is so absolute "he can even circumvent or deny natural laws, for it is not officially noon until the Captain gives the order to "make it so" and the bell is struck affirming his order" (Fisher 595). In such a system,

the people have no power because reality has failed to live up to the ideal. In an ideal world, Captain Claret would act on behalf of the interests of *the people*. In reality, however, *the people* are manipulated into serving the interests of the Captain. This egregious reality is never more evident than when the Captain orders two blacks, May-Day and Rose-Water, to fight for his entertainment.

Next on the naval hierarchy is the Commodore who is representative of the most affluent members of American society. Despite his high rank and consequently his responsibility to *the people*, he remains out of reach. Most of his days are spent within the safety and comfort of his cabin. In fact, he so rarely leaves his quarters that when he does *the people* are often left speechless by his mere presence. Like other wealthy citizens, he benefits from the labor and bravery of *the people* while sharing none of their burdens. His evil stems not from his deeds but from his apathy.

Yet, *the people* are not innocent bystanders. They too are active participants in the evils of this man-of-war world. Melville spends considerable time delineating the various ranks and duties; however, generally speaking, there are only two types of *people*: the main-top men and the masses. Our protagonist, White-Jacket, belongs to the main-top men. Among *the people*, they “rank highest in the social order and esteem the arts and humanities” (Fisher 596). They are the thinkers, readers, writers, and philosophers desperately clinging to their individuality in a world that demands their conformity. Although not as remote as the Commodore, they separate themselves from the masses by remaining high above them. Perched atop the masts, they look down on the “depravity, vulgarity, and ignorance” (Reynolds 15) of the common *people*. Yet, even Jack Chase, the main-top man of all main-top men, can’t escape the stain of corruption. In spite of his frankness, intellectual attainments, and big heart “his sustenance is war” and his livelihood is derived from a death-dealing business (Miller 290). As for the masses themselves, theft, violence, and degeneracy run rampant. As described by White-Jacket, “Like pears closely packed, the crowded crew mutually decay through close contact, and every plague-spot is contagious” (379).

But, Melville’s point is not merely that corruption exists. His point is that a man-of-war creates men of war. All of the evils present are a direct result of a war driven world in which one man’s tragedy is another

man's blessing. Consequently, the evil in *White-Jacket* is a direct byproduct of the naval system. Likewise, corruption in America is a byproduct of our failed system. If not for our history of oppression, class warfare, and hypocrisy, Donald Trump could never have risen to power. *White-Jacket* challenges us to acknowledge the American nightmare as well as the American Dream. The book concludes with this final image: "Outwardly regarded, our craft is a lie; for all that is outwardly seen of it is the clean-swept deck, and oft-painted planks . . . above the waterline; whereas the vast mass of our fabric with all its storerooms of secrets, forever slides along far under the surface." This integral lesson—to look beneath the surface—is as relevant now as it was in Melville's time. Rather than condemn unscrupulous people, we must condemn the corrupted American systems that produce them.

II. Disparity

There can be no equality when freedom rings alongside the clamor of chains, no peace in a nation constantly prepped for war, and no harmony when reality is discordant with our ideals. Unfortunately, this has always been the case throughout American history. In *White-Jacket*, Melville explores this disparity by contrasting ideals of egalitarianism, patriotism, and Christianity with the harsh realities of our man-of-war world.

America was founded on egalitarian principles. Thomas Jefferson's famous decree that "all men are created equal" in the Declaration of Independence forms the core of the American Dream. Unlike England, America was to be a place of opportunity in which every man could achieve success regardless of their birthright. However, in actuality, there has never been equality in America. In fact, hopes for an egalitarian society were dashed before the Puritans ever set foot in Massachusetts Bay when John Winthrop declared "God Almighty in his most holy and wise providence hath soe disposed of the Condicion of mankind, as in all times some must be rich some poore, some high and eminent in power and dignitie; others meane and in subjeccion" before their fleet even set sail. The subsequent inferior treatment of women and minority groups also prevented egalitarianism from ever becoming anything more than an ideal. In *White-Jacket*, Melville attacks flogging in

the Navy “with a revolutionary egalitarianism” (Zirker 477), yet remains suspiciously quiet on the greatest egalitarian issue of his day—slavery.

While he denounced human bondage in *Mardi* and later describes slavery as “man’s foulest crime” in his 1860 poem “Misgivings” (Zirker 483), at the time he wrote *White-Jacket* Melville’s feelings on the issue were ambivalent at best. Like the majority of the population in 1850, Melville did not view slavery as an egalitarian issue. He does, however, seem to recognize the similarities between the lashing of slaves and the flogging of seamen. Guinea, a slave aboard the *Neversink* actually runs away during a seaman’s flogging because the practices are so homologous. In his previous works, Melville’s egalitarianism extends to other races but “an ambivalence towards the Negro left its mark on *White-Jacket*” (Zirker 482). He acknowledges slavery but does not protest it. Additionally, all of his black characters seem to be stereotypical caricatures. “The very names he gave the characters Sunshine, Old Coffee, May-Day, and Rose-Water are out of minstrel shows” (Zirker 483). Due to the threat of civil war and national disunity, many Americans exercised “all the skills of avoidance which they had developed over the years of their national existence in order to maintain the ideal of freedom and equality while they countenanced slavery” (Zirker 481). Like their predecessors, contemporary Americans are also guilty of avoiding egalitarian issues like systemic racism while maintaining ideals of equality.

Patriotism is another ideal that becomes warped on the man-of-war. Before his disillusionment, White-Jacket has full confidence in American democracy and wholeheartedly believes in the nation’s political and moral role as “redeemer of the world” (Fisher 597). However, he soon comes to realize the ways in which “patriotic propaganda enslaves the mind” and to quote Thoreau makes a man “the slave-driver of himself” (Fisher 597). Although the US Navy does not engage in the British practice of impressment, it does engage in an “impressment of the mind through patriotic propaganda, nationalistic pride, and cultural ethnocentrism” (Fisher 598). Through his unquestioning patriotism, White-Jacket unknowingly sacrifices his individuality and intellectual integrity and participates in his own imprisonment and debasement (Fisher 603). The underlying message is if we “subscribe to the myths of national purpose, we participate in a cover-up” (Fisher 603). One need only to look at our country’s “myths of national purpose” to see the

truth of that statement. When we subscribe to the myth of manifest destiny, we participate in the cover-up of Native American genocide. Similarly, when we subscribe to the myth of a war on terror, we participate in the cover-up of Guantanamo Bay.

But, perhaps the greatest disparity in *White-Jacket* comes from the stark contrasts between the ideals of Christianity and its reality aboard the *Neversink*. The Chaplain is merely present to fulfill a role and his sermons hold absolutely no meaning for the crew. The men are Christian in ideology only. In practice, they are sinners of the highest order. Melville finds great irony in the idea of a Christian warship because true Christianity cannot exist in a world of war. *White-Jacket* confronts this dissonance himself when he stumbles upon one of the cannon operators in deep prayer (Miller 292). This image of a “murderer” in prayer leads him to the profound insight that although Christ was “full of the wisdom of heaven” (304) his gospel lacks the practical wisdom of earth.

Melville’s microcosm paints America as “a world of egalitarian ideals and class warfare, of democratic principles and brutal oppression” (Allen 47), of religious superiority and spiritual bankruptcy. It is a nation struggling to live up to the ideals on which it was founded. Unfortunately, as long as this remains true our problems will persist because it is only through egalitarianism, brotherhood, and humility that the world of war can be dismantled.

III. Deliverance

Waking from the American Dream is painful. Opening your eyes to the corruption, discrimination, and immorality that permeate American society is an action that can never be undone. The reason so many American youths are currently distraught is because for the first time in their young lives America has failed to live up to her ideals. In an election that was advertised as love versus hate—hate won.

That is a hard truth to swallow. Where do we go from here? In trying to answer this question, some will respond in anger. They will fight fire with fire and not realize that by hating those who hate them they become the very person they despise. Others will respond out of fear or hopelessness. They will either retreat physically by leaving the country or

emotionally by disengaging with the political scene. However, American culture cannot change unless our youth are willing to participate in the national dialogue. Unless we learn from the “beating hearts” of the past, our ideological differences will continue to escalate until our instruments of war turn inward once more. According to the lessons of *White-Jacket*, the only way to save a world of war is through pacifism and baptism into shared humanity.

“So long as a man-of-war exists” (Adler 29), there will always be conflict. As previously stated, a man-of-war creates men of war. The tyranny of the *Neversink* “stems from the fact that the ship’s primary purpose is war” (Adler 29). In Melville’s opinion war is the “greatest of all evils” because it turns humanity against itself. The only way to end our world of war is to rid ourselves of the war machine and all of its many accessories. In *White-Jacket* he depicts this theme of disarmament with an image of the *Neversink* with “her guns hoisted out—her powder-magazine, shot lockers, and armories discharged—till not one vestige of a fighting thing is left in her, from furthest stem to utmost stern” (Adler 29). War mentality has so deeply penetrated American culture that online discussions often feel like ambushes, political campaigns are more representative of guerilla warfare than democracy, and constituents are treated as POWs rather than citizens. We need a pacifism that informs more than just our foreign policy. We need a pacifism that informs our social media practices, journalism, protests, and relationships. In a world of war, hate will always win because it doesn’t concern itself with morality, legality, or humanity. It will always win because love was never meant to be a weapon. The “beating heart” of *White-Jacket* tells us we must respond to our hostile society with peace, nonviolence, and passive resistance; rather than fight for control of the machine, we must disarm it.

But, peace alone will not heal our broken spirits. Pacifism will not return our innocence nor will it overcome our disillusionment. *White-Jacket*’s answer to the question where do we go from here is *into the sea*. The scene in which *White-Jacket* falls overboard and is freed from his jacket is one of the most dramatic and celebrated baptisms in all of American literature. “Encased in his jacket, a garment fantastically contrived, patched up from wishful thinking, childhood dreams, and escapist hopes, *White-Jacket* in his isolated retreat high on the main top, far

from the harsh realities of the deck, hopes that his garment will protect him from the storms which rage around Cape Horn (evil)” (Vincent 308). The garment marks him as a “white sheep in a black flock” (Vincent 307). It symbolizes his self-sufficiency, isolation, terror, and innocence. Ultimately, his jacket fails him. His innocence cannot protect him from the corruption, disillusionment, or sin prevalent on the man-of-war. When he falls overboard he must choose between life and death; between baptism or drowning.

For one instant an agonizing revulsion came over me as I found myself utterly sinking. Next moment the force of my fall was expended; and there I hung, vibrating in the mid-deep. What wild sounds then rang in my ear! One was a soft moaning, as of low waves upon the beach; the other wild and heartlessly jubilant, as of the sea in the height of the tempest. Oh soul! thou then heardest life and death: as he who stands upon the Corinthian shore hears both the Ionian and Aegean waves. (371)

When White-Jacket falls “he is ready to die” (Albrecht 23). He has no place on the man-of-war. He is disenchanted and unwilling to give up his individuality. His eyes have been opened to reality leaving him unsure of how to go on. Then, something miraculous happens.

But of a sudden some fashionless form brushed my side—some inert, soiled fish of the sea; the thrill of being alive again tingled in my nerves, and the strong shunning of death shocked me through. (457)

He chooses life. When he buoys out of the water he emerges as a new being. His innocence is shed as he rips his jacket “straight up and down” as if “ripping open” himself. His return from the bottom of the ocean symbolizes the recovery of the spirit which had been flogged out of him by adversity (Miller 278). He understands that “Life, with all of its corruption, in spite of its falling far short of all conceivable ideals, regardless of its injustice, its evil, its inconsistency—life has a stronger appeal than death” (Miller 292). As noted by James Miller, “Deprived of his jacket, he gains his humanity; jolted from his isolation he discovers comradeship; stripped of his innocence, he finds his soul.” Each of us

must follow White-Jacket's example and throw in our lot with the "guilt of mankind or perish" (Miller 292).

In this world of war, we are all "pears closely packed" mutually decaying through contact. We fall short of our ideals on a daily basis. As articulated by White-Jacket, "Title, and rank, and wealth, and education cannot unmake human nature" (299). Yet, despite our many shortcomings and plethora of differences, we must find ways to coexist peacefully. In the wake of the 2016 election, many of us are underwater trying to determine if we should sink or swim. Should we rejoin humanity in all of its ugliness and corruption or withdraw into our own white jackets? Melville urges us to baptize ourselves into the brotherhood of mankind, look beneath the surface of American conflict, strive for the ideals this nation was founded on and disarm the world of war with pacifism. If we can accomplish these things, America will never sink. To the disillusioned youth wondering what to do next—become like White-Jacket; become an American hero adept at "metamorphosis, adaptability, and indomitable self-mastery" (Hoffman 197).

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