

Melville's Aesthetic Innovation for the Initiation Narrative in *Moby-Dick*

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Abstract

Herman Melville's masterpiece *Moby-Dick* not only describes the story of Captain Ahab's whale hunt, but also contains the growth writing of Ishmael's self-exploration. With the rise of the study on American Bildungsroman in the 1940s, people have tended to interpret Ishmael's growth from a thematic perspective, but the innovating techniques used in initiation narrative has often been ignored. Based upon the social, historical and cultural context of *Moby-Dick*, this paper makes analysis on Ishmael from three dimensions-the structure of Ishmael's coming-of-age narrative, the sequence of his coming-of-age narrative, as well as the shaping of the narrative subject. This paper explores Melville's unique narrative strategy in defamiliarizing the structure of American Adam Myth, examines the cyclical time model driven by Ishmael's visual aesthetics, analyzes Ishmael's ambiguous shaping that blends fictionality and facticity, expecting to reveal the growth logic hidden behind these innovating narrative techniques.

Keywords

Melville; *Moby-Dick*; Ishmael; Growth; Narrative Techniques.

1. Introduction

Herman Melville (1819-1891) was a key figure of the American Renaissance in the nineteenth century. His masterpiece *Moby Dick* was hailed by D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930) as a "great book" [1]. In terms of narrative style, *Moby Dick* has often been called "a work sui generis" by virtue of its pastiche-like style [2]. Since the 1940s, with growing American scholarly interest in adolescent development in literature and the rise of American Bildungsroman studies, critics have increasingly noted that *Moby Dick* not only recounts Captain Ahab's obsessive hunt for the white whale but also traces Ishmael's journey of self-discovery. Leslie Fiedler, for instance, situated Ishmael's initiation within the socio-cultural context of America, exploring the relationship between the developing individual and the bourgeoisie [3]. William Coyle examined Ishmael's growth thematically [4], while Rod Horton focused on Melville's adaptation of the European Bildungsroman tradition, particularly its "self-portrait" motif [5]. However, these studies have not centered on the narrative techniques of initiation in *Moby Dick* nor delved deeply into how Ishmael's self-formation is narratively constructed. In China, while some scholars have touched upon the initiation theme and its narrative aesthetics in *Moby Dick*, in-depth studies remain scarce. This gap provides the impetus for the present study.

In fact, Melville's *Moby-Dick* not only encompasses the thematic exploration of Ishmael's self-discovery and growth, but also serves as a classic text for examining the narrative strategies of the American Bildungsroman, having significantly contributed to the development of its narrative aesthetics. This paper aims to focus on Ishmael's transformative journey from despair to rebirth within *Moby-Dick*, situating the analysis within the historical and cultural context of the novel's era. By examining three key dimensions-the narrative structure of Ishmael's development, the sequence of his growth narrative, and the construction of the developing

subject-this study seeks to explore in depth how Melville narrates Ishmael's formation through a process of both inheriting and innovating upon tradition. Through this analysis of its narrative aesthetics, the paper will reassess Moby-Dick's distinctive value and contribution to the history of the American Bildungsroman.

2. Innovation of the Initiation Narrative Structure within the Framework of the American Adam Myth

According to D. H. Lawrence, American writers' depiction of "golden youth" contributed to the creation of "the true myth of America" [1]. Expanding upon Lawrence's assertion, R. W. B. Lewis further identifies this "true myth of America" as the "American Adam"- "a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities" [6]. Indeed, since the nation's founding, American national literature has persistently exhibited a "theme of innocence" and a "cult of adolescence" [7]. Most novelists, whether consciously or unconsciously, have participated in the collective creation of the American Adam myth through narratives centered on the maturation of adolescent protagonists. Melville stands as a prime example. In narrating the developmental journey of the youthful Ishmael in Moby-Dick, Melville not only continues the narrative framework of the American Adam myth favored by his predecessors but also defamiliarizes this established structure through innovative means, thereby intricately linking Ishmael's individual growth with the formation of an American national identity.

National myths serve as crucial conduits for conveying the "commonly shared convictions on the purposes and meanings of the nation" [8], and the "American Adam" is frequently regarded as the "most highly unified, and possibly the most generally accepted myth" conveying the essence of American national identity [9]. In their participation in "weaving" this American Adam myth, early American writers' preference for narratives of adolescent development can be attributed to two primary factors. Firstly, the emergence of an adolescent demographic and the concomitant prominence of adolescent developmental issues in the early 19th-century United States provided these writers with compelling subject matter for myth-making. Hans Sebald notes that traditional Western agricultural societies primarily recognized only "children" and "youth." However, increasing demands for "formal education" and "vocational training" within burgeoning urban and industrial societies engendered a "slower, more ambiguous" transitional phase between childhood and youth-namely, "adolescence." In the early 19th-century United States, the nascent Industrial Revolution similarly catalyzed the emergence of an adolescent cohort. Unprepared for the rapid social transformations wrought by industrialization, the developmental challenges and "turbulence" experienced by these adolescents became inscribed as "prototypes of American society" [10]. Consequently, the struggles of American youth became a point of entry for writers seeking to articulate "American national purposes." Secondly, inherent characteristics of the Bildungsroman itself further reinforced this tendency. Literary historian Franco Moretti argues that while an individual's youth involves "real" developments-such as educational influences, intergenerational bonds, and spiritual purification-the Bildungsroman distills from these "real" youths a "symbolic" youth figure, capable of reflecting the modernity of society at large [11]. In other words, the narrative of individual development in the Bildungsroman shares a homologous relationship with modern social development and national construction. Given that the early 19th-century United States was precisely such an emerging nation undergoing rapid industrialization and urbanization, this narrative characteristic of the Bildungsroman proved ideally suited to the needs of its nationalistic writers. Therefore, from Washington Irving, who first cultivated a distinctly American literary voice, to James Fenimore Cooper and Nathaniel Hawthorne, who boldly endeavored to forge a national literature, they all demonstrated a marked preference for depicting innocent youths in their construction of America's "New Adam" myth. Influenced by

these predecessors, the deeply nationalistic Melville also grappled with the imperative of creating an American "New Adam." As he articulated in his contemporaneous essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses," written during the composition of *Moby-Dick*, America was "as young as her own virgin soil," its morning dew as "damp as the dews of Eden" [12]. For Melville, the early 19th-century American republic represented a new Eden, providing a fresh proving ground for forging a "New Adam." Thus, by situating the youthful Ishmael's personal development within this new Edenic social context, Melville simultaneously embeds Ishmael's growth within the grand tradition of the American Adam myth and, through the homologous relationship between individual development and national evolution, imbues that myth with new significance.

In deploying the "theme of youth" to depict the "American Adam," Melville adheres to the traditional narrative architecture established by his predecessors, which posits a fundamental opposition between the idealized qualities of the American Adam protagonist and the contours of American reality. Regarding these idealized qualities of the American Adam, R. W. B. Lewis aptly observes that the Adamic figure in American literary history, emancipated from the burdens of Old World "history" and "ancestry" and granted the new world of the American continent, consequently embodies "heroic innocence," an "adventurous spirit," and a pervasive sense of hope and possibility [6]. Concerning this Adamic figure in American literature, a tradition of testing these idealized qualities against the backdrop of American reality emerged, arguably beginning with Natty Bumppo's confrontation with white settlers. R. W. B. Lewis further notes that early American writers consistently examined "the viability of the American Adam's innocence in the context of American reality" [13]. In Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* (1823-1841), Natty Bumppo embodies the American Adam, endowed with idealized traits of courage, adventurousness, and a love of nature, yet he is perpetually tested by the "civilization" of colonialists and developers encroaching upon his frontier. In Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Arthur Dimmesdale represents a different facet of the American Adam—one yearning for emotional freedom, yielding to personal desire, and seeking escape from worldly constraints—yet his ideals are relentlessly tormented by the moral strictures of Puritanical society. Melville, as a successor, absorbed the artistic influences of Cooper and Hawthorne, crafting in Ishmael another American Adam figure who similarly contends with American reality. On one hand, Ishmael embodies the innocent qualities of both Natty Bumppo and Dimmesdale: he possesses an irrepressible "curiosity" for the "portentous and mysterious" whale and exhibits a powerful spirit of adventure, professing his love "to sail forbidden seas, and land on barbarous coasts." [14]. On the other hand, a significant motivation for Ishmael's flight to sea is his profound melancholy induced by the modern civilization of the land. He expresses weariness with all forms of dignified urban labor and believes "money to be the root of all earthly ills." The characteristic rhythms of city life make existence on shore feel like an imprisonment; only by going to sea can one access "pure air" and "the wholesome exercise" [14]. Clearly, Melville inherits the narrative model of Cooper and Hawthorne, presenting the tension between Ishmael's youthful idealized qualities and the dominant currents of American society, thereby perpetuating the classic American literary trope of the Adamic figure "fleeing society and retreating into nature."

However, it is crucial to recognize that Melville's inheritance of the American Adam archetype does not signify his subjugation to the anxiety of influence. He simultaneously maintains his aesthetic autonomy, attempting to defamiliarize the established narrative mode. This defamiliarization is primarily manifested in *Moby-Dick* through the subtle, implicit connection forged between Ishmael's personal development and the consolidation of an American national identity. A comparison between Melville, Cooper, and Hawthorne reveals that the construction of the developing subject in the latter two authors' works is not entirely emancipated from Old World traditions. Natty Bumppo is embedded within the history of European colonialism;

Dimmesdale remains constrained by the legacy of European religious thought. The eventual disillusionment and death of these protagonists further reflect Cooper and Hawthorne's profound ambivalence regarding the possibility of constructing a wholly independent American New Adam. For these writers, "it was so paradoxical for America to need English myths to proclaim its independence from England" [13]. Thus, Cooper and Hawthorne bequeathed to Melville a pressing question: In this nascent nation, how could the narrative of adolescent development be effectively grafted onto the American Adam myth to shape an American New Adam fully independent of the European "Old Adam"? Melville's *Moby-Dick* provides a potential answer. Building upon the traditional narrative architecture of conflict between the developing protagonist's idealized qualities and American reality, Melville strategically deploys symbolization and the incorporation of indigenous American elements in his portrayal of both the protagonist and his environment. Through these innovations, the narrative of individual growth becomes intricately intertwined with, and ultimately parallels, the formation and affirmation of an American national identity.

Unlike Cooper and Hawthorne, Melville first undertakes an indigenizing treatment of the developing protagonist's identity construction through symbolic means. With the opening line of *Moby-Dick*—"Call me Ishmael"—Melville immediately suggests that "Ishmael" functions merely as a symbolic name the developing protagonist assigns to himself. Although the name "Ishmael" originates from the European Bible, Melville progressively Americanizes the immediate reality confronting the developing protagonist, thereby achieving the indigenization of the developing subject. As discussed earlier, Melville vividly depicts in the opening chapters an American continental civilization saturated with "money" and "labor-capital relations," thereby shaping Ishmael's anguish, alienation, and impulse to escape. After Ishmael embarks on his voyage, Melville further emphasizes the Americanness of the maritime "plantation" [14], placing Ishmael within this boundless ocean where his "thoughts and "waves" are blended harmoniously [14], fully revealing Ishmael's contentment within America's distinctive natural landscape. Regarding the *Pequod*, the vessel Ishmael boards, Melville explicitly notes that among the employed seamen, "the native American liberally provides the brains" [14], thus enabling Ishmael, influenced by this distinctively American vessel, to continuously question, experience epiphanies, and ultimately attain self-knowledge and rebirth. Evidently, throughout Ishmael's developmental narrative-traversing "anguish, alienation-departure-ordeal-epiphany-self-knowledge-rebirth"—Melville completely transcends the artistic limitations of Cooper and Hawthorne, who remained confined within Old World cultural frameworks. Instead, he portrays the immediate reality confronting Ishmael within the context of American national culture. As Bakhtin observes, an individual's development "is no longer his private affair; he grows together with the world" [15]. Melville Americanizes this world of development, thereby creating a "New Adam" who matures within an authentically American context.

3. Cyclical-Progressive Temporality of Growth Driven by Visual Aesthetics

Thus far, by innovating upon the narrative architecture of the American Adam myth, Melville situates Ishmael's developmental narrative within the expansive context of American indigenization. To advance the dynamic interaction between Ishmael and his American reality, Melville subsequently foregrounds Ishmael's visual aesthetic experience within the specific narrative episodes. This narrative strategy serves a dual function: it facilitates Ishmael's self-cognition and self-formation while simultaneously constructing a cyclical-progressive temporality of development in his cognitive growth.

The visual aestheticization of the external environment constitutes Ishmael's primary mode of engaging with the world. To this end, Melville adopts Ishmael's internal perspective to present his observations and reflections throughout the voyage, rendering Ishmael akin to Walter

Benjamin's flâneur-wandering, continually observing and contemplating the external world, and articulating through language his visions of worldly images [16]. The renowned filmmaker Éric Rohmer once remarked that the visual descriptions in *Moby-Dick* rival those of a "veritable film," asserting that the pictorial beauty rendered in Melville's prose can be maximally realized on screen [17]. Throughout the work, Ishmael ceaselessly presents the external world within his field of vision. For instance, upon entering the Spouter-Inn, Ishmael describes the painting at its entrance thus:

"But what most puzzled and confounded you was a long, limber, portentous, black mass of something hovering in the centre of the picture over three blue, dim, perpendicular lines floating in a nameless yeast. A boggy, soggy, squitchy picture truly, enough to drive a nervous man distracted. Yet was there a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity about it that fairly froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath with yourself to find out what that marvellous painting meant "[14].

The obscure painting acquires visual representational qualities under Ishmael's gaze; he meticulously observes its form, color, and spatial arrangement, thereby evoking complex emotional experiences within himself-fear, sublimity, and fascination. It can be said that aesthetic engagement with the external world represents an innate disposition continuously manifested by Ishmael throughout *Moby-Dick*, and this manifestation suggests the formative influence of external aesthetic objects upon the adolescent's internal cognition.

Indeed, within the ideology of the European classical Bildungsroman, a longstanding tradition connects aesthetic experience with individual development. The eighteenth-century German writer Friedrich Schiller, in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, asserts: "It is only through beauty that man makes his way to freedom... for it is only through beauty that he arrives at the perfection of his nature, since his nature must accord with beauty" [18]. Subsequently, the great German writer Goethe, in his *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*-widely regarded as the prototype of the European Bildungsroman-advocates aesthetic education as a means to "bring harmony to the individual and to society" [11]. Clearly, Melville inherits this narrative tradition of the Bildungsroman, once again enriching Ishmael's inner self through the representation of his aesthetic experience.

It is noteworthy that in narrating Ishmael's aesthetic experience, Melville emphasizes not only the external world's formative influence upon the individual but also Ishmael's heightened self-awareness within the aesthetic process. Consider Ishmael's mode of viewing Queequeg as an example. Prior to encountering Queequeg, Ishmael harbored defensive and fearful attitudes toward this "savage" due to personal prejudice. However, when Ishmael first sits beside Queequeg and observes him at close range, he instinctively employs physiognomy and phrenology to meticulously decipher the inner characteristics concealed beneath Queequeg's savage exterior. From Queequeg's visual appearance-his "marred" face, his "unearthly tattooings", his "deep eyes"-Ishmael discerns Queequeg's courageous and combative temperament [14]. Subsequently, from Queequeg's "freely drawn-out forehead," he analyzes his remarkable intelligence, humorously comparing Queequeg to a "George Washington cannibalistically developed" [14]. This interpretive act instantly dissolves Ishmael's prior defensiveness and fear; instead, he comes to feel that Queequeg's "Socratic wisdom" renders his own "my splintered heart and maddened hand" no longer "turned against the wolfish world," acknowledging that "this soothing savage had redeemed" all things [14]. Evidently, in his encounter with Queequeg, Ishmael manifests an impulse to comprehend the Other-an impulse that catalyzes the perfection of his inner self. It is precisely through representing this self-awareness within Ishmael's aesthetic experience and the subsequent illuminations it generates

that Melville propels Ishmael's cognitive development toward successive climactic moments of epiphany.

From the perspective of modern narrative theory, actions or plots constitute the "dynamic aspect of narrative," propelling the narrative forward along a temporal sequence [19]. Melville, however, utilizes Ishmael's aesthetic experience to advance the unfolding of his developmental narrative, adhering to a temporal model of growth characterized by cyclical recurrence and spiral progression. Ishmael's evolving aesthetic cognition of the white whale exemplifies this cyclical-progressive temporal mode.

Initially, Ishmael harbors only a "sensuous impulse" toward the white whale, with his aesthetic cognition remaining at the level of transcendental imagination. From the "whiteness of the whale," he fantasizes about various terrifying and mysterious images: the white phantom "albatross" , the majestic specter white horses , and the dread "pallor" of a corpse's countenance.[14] As the narrative progresses, Ishmael subsequently manifests a pronounced "rational impulse" toward the whale, attempting "to extract latent truth from reality" [20]. Through practical or reliable citations , he deduces that Moby Dick is a Sperm Whale, and that the Sperm Whale is in some cases sufficiently powerful, knowing, and judiciously malicious.[14] In later chapters, Ishmael's cognition of the whale reverts to the initial sensuous impulse, as the warmth beneath the whale's blubber evokes in him an admiration for its strong individual vitality.[14] Simultaneously, however, he adopts a rational biological perspective, noting that the whale's blubber enables it to maintain body temperature and adapt to various climates.[14] As Strauch observes, Ishmael's cognition returns to positions previously abandoned, but always with renewed and altered consciousness [21]. Some scholars suggest that Ishmael's increasingly nuanced cognition of the white whale forms a "contrapuntal plot" [22] with Ahab's unrelenting "sensuous impulse," creating a stark contrast between the two [2]. Yet, considered solely from the perspective of Ishmael's internal dynamic development, he exhibits a cyclical pattern of growth: "sensuous impulse-rational impulse-sensuous impulse integrated with rational impulse-..." Within this cyclical pattern, continuity and change in development achieve dialectical unity.

In essence, the cyclical-progressive temporal model Melville employs is inherently linked to the ancient Greek conception of cyclical time, reflecting Melville's contemplations on individual development and the trajectory of national evolution. During the period of Moby-Dick's composition (1850-1851), the United States, having achieved independence, was engaged in constructing a "New World." This nascent nation increasingly embraced an accelerated linear temporality: its people "had little sense of the past and little concern for it"; they likewise failed to perceive the "present," instead viewing it exclusively "through the lens of the future." Even in newborn children, they invariably foresaw "future presidents and millionaires" [23]. Against this historical backdrop, Melville maintained a lucid consciousness, "looking back to the past" with the disposition of a "morning archaeologist" who took "interest in origins," diligently seeking from Western antiquity the sequences of life's development [24]. Consequently, Melville adopted the cyclical conception of time originating in ancient Greece-namely, understanding time as a circle, revolving ceaselessly, returning upon itself. Through this cyclical temporal model, Melville not only critiques the prevailing linear temporality of his era, which largely discarded the past while pursuing the future, but also articulates his profound concern and philosophical reflection upon individual growth and, by extension, national development.

In the epilogue of the novel, Melville employs allusion and symbolism to summarize and extend Ishmael's cyclical-progressive development. Ishmael invokes a passage from the Book of Job in the Old Testament-"And I only am escaped alone to tell thee" [14]-thereby identifying himself as the sole survivor and messenger of the whaling tragedy. The implication is that the preceding narrative constitutes the present Ishmael's retrospection upon his past experiences. This further demonstrates that, in Melville's conception, "growth" by no means signifies the

abandonment of the "past"; rather, the "present" emerges from the accumulation of "remnants" from various past stages.

The surviving Ishmael, drawn toward the vortex's "center" as he descends with the swirling whirlpool, owes his salvation to the coffin that rises from its depths. Following his brief account of being rescued by the Rachel, the novel abruptly concludes. Symbolically, the "vortex" represents cyclical-progressive time, while Ishmael's personal development conforms to this temporal progression, culminating in his ultimate growth and rebirth. The open ending implicitly suggests that Ishmael's development remains incomplete; his developmental time possesses infinite extensibility, oriented "toward the future." Thus, Melville completes Ishmael's developmental narrative, constructing his own cyclical conception of time. Within this dynamic, cyclical life process, the "past" is no longer severed but rather permeates and influences the "present," together pointing toward the "future."

4. The Construction of an Ambiguous Growing Subject

In summarizing the narrative characteristics of the Bildungsroman, Goban incisively observes that "the Bildungsroman is distinguished from other types of novels by its element of 'formation'" [25]. In other words, as a literary genre, the Bildungsroman focuses on the process whereby an individual continuously discovers and perfects the self through interaction with the external world, thereby integrating oneself into an organic whole. To enable Ishmael's self-exploration, Melville, in *Moby-Dick*, both inherits and expands the mythic motif of the American Adam, bringing Ishmael into contact and interaction with the indigenous American environment. Concurrently, Melville focuses narratively on Ishmael's visual cognition of the external world, allowing it to undergo continuous renewal and refinement within a cyclical-progressive temporal framework.

At the novel's conclusion, Ishmael's survival suggests the narrative resolution of his self-exploratory journey, while simultaneously prompting readers to engage in retrospective aesthetic reflection: Does the "I" narrated in the text equate to Melville's own "authentic self" in constructing Ishmael as a narrative subject? Or, put differently, does the narrator Ishmael coalesce with the author Melville, or does a fissure exist between them? Melville evidently provides an ambiguous answer. He fuses the authentic self with the fictional self within Ishmael's autobiographical narrative, constructing an Ishmael endowed with the attributes of a "dual self," thereby intensifying the ontological ambiguity of Ishmael's "I" and revealing the paradoxical nature of self-construction within the developmental process.

If one juxtaposes Melville's personal experiences and perceptions with the figure of Ishmael, it becomes evident that *Moby-Dick* possesses a distinctly "autobiographical" dimension. Melville was born into a family of Dutch and English descent in upstate New York. During his adolescence, a series of unfortunate experiences-including family decline, his father's death, and an emotionally oppressive household-shaped him into a "rebel." Driven by a determination to struggle against fate, he repeatedly ran away from home and embarked on sea voyages [26]. The repression and melancholy of his youth, along with his rich experiences as a sailor, provided the material for his creation of the figure Ishmael. It is therefore unsurprising that, in the opening pages of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael repeatedly hints at his situation: running away from home, suffering from depression, and yearning for the sea.

Beyond the parallels in personal experience, the autobiographical dimension of *Moby-Dick* also manifests in the convergence of their intellectual dispositions. For instance, Ishmael's immersion in the experience of unity with heaven and earth after first ascending the masthead of the Pequod corresponds closely with the pleasure Melville described to Hawthorne during the composition of *Moby-Dick*-the sensation of living in the all. Just as Ishmael feels his life merging into "the mysterious ocean beneath" [14], Melville, in a letter to Hawthorne, articulated

a similar experience: "This 'all' feeling... you must often have felt it, lying on the grass on a warm summer day. Your legs seem to send out shoots into the earth. Your hair feels like leaves upon your head" [12]. Furthermore, the sense of balance that Ishmael gradually achieves between transcendental imagination and rational cognition throughout his journey—a dialectical mode of perception—equally constitutes an artistic representation of Melville's dualistic worldview. In Melville's view, "human beings live in an indissoluble dualistic world," perpetually caught in the "contradictory situation" between opposing forces such as "spirit and matter," "head and heart," and "good and evil" [27]. Thus considered, Ishmael is to a significant extent Melville's "alter ego," whose developmental experiences and internal cognition expose Melville's delineation of his authentic self.

In the realm of autobiographical narrative, an excessive pursuit of faithfully depicting the secular self risks pushing the portrayal of the "self" toward the extremes of individuation and particularity, thereby resulting in a lack of universality in the writing of the "self." In a nascent nation like America, urgently engaged in constructing its own identity, the surge of nationalist sentiment generated a pressing need within public discourse to appropriately restrain the private, secularized "I" and instead construct an "I" capable of representing the nation and society. This public demand directly contributed to the gradual marginalization of the autobiographical tradition centered on the private and particular self. As historian Saum observes regarding the prevailing national sentiment of restraining the secular self during that era: "The self was no longer a passage to fulfillment or perfection; it had instead become an endless, frustrating dark obstruction" [28]. Consequently, Melville's pre-Moby-Dick works had been widely controversial due to their pronounced autobiographical elements. The anxiety generated by these controversies impelled Melville—a writer acutely sensitive to literary form—to resolve to fully mobilize his imagination and creativity, attempting to integrate a socially representative fictional self into his writing of the authentic self. Therefore, the "I" depicted by Ishmael within the text serves not only as a vehicle for Melville to articulate his personal experiences and perceptions but also incorporates fictional elements. The eminent critic Terry Eagleton elucidates this fictional quality by examining the novel's opening line, "Call me Ishmael." In Eagleton's view, through this seemingly casual address to the reader, Melville effectively transforms the appellation "Ishmael" into "a set of black marks on the page" [29]. This distinctive opening establishes a fundamental tone of mystery and indeterminacy regarding the narrator Ishmael's authentic identity.

Throughout the subsequent narrative, although Ishmael functions as both a first-person narrator and a direct participant in the whaling expedition, his self-narration does not maintain consistency. Rather, he frequently recedes from the whaling events, supplanted by omniscient narrators in chapters such as "The Quarter-Deck," "Sunset," and "The Doubloon," thereby creating distance between Ishmael and the author Melville. As Chase observes, Ishmael "disappears as a character; as observer, he is merely the voice of the omniscient author" [27]. Regarding this inconsistency in Ishmael's developmental narrative—disrupted by the "author's voice"—some critics or readers often consider it detrimental to the fluency and experiential quality of reading Moby-Dick. Yet it should be recognized that this precisely constitutes Melville's distinctive approach to foregrounding Ishmael's fictionality. By rupturing the identity between Ishmael and the actual author, Melville enables readers to keenly perceive the fissure, thereby revealing that the "I" depicted by Ishmael is a product of textual construction. In the concluding part of this work, Melville further accentuates the "legendary" quality of Ishmael's developmental journey by rendering him the sole survivor. The surreal and translogical elements inherent in this legendary characteristic further intensify the rupture between Ishmael and the actual author Melville, as well as between textual narration and lived experience. It is precisely through Melville's organic synthesis of the "authentic self" and the "fictional self" that he shapes Ishmael—a developing subject "I" at once "both real and illusory."

Within this "I" articulated by Ishmael, the authentic and the fictional do not maintain clear boundaries; rather, they complement and interweave with one another in Ishmael's self-construction. Consequently, the aesthetic characteristic of abstraction and ambiguity in the figure of Ishmael becomes further accentuated.

From the perspective of literary aesthetics, although Ishmael's ambiguity diminishes the figurative specificity of this character, it simultaneously enhances readers' interest and desire for exploration. Prompted by the question "Who, exactly, is Ishmael?," readers are more inclined to follow his perspective, tracing his psychological journey from alienation and misanthropy, through his departure for whaling and self-exploration, to his gradual attainment of self-discovery. It is precisely through Ishmael's self-developmental narrative that Melville is able to embed Ahab's "Promethean" tragedy, enabling readers to apprehend Ishmael's path of growth replete with peril and ordeal. As Smith observes, "Ishmael's alienation" constitutes the "central theme" of the entire work, while "the hunt for the white whale is relegated to a subordinate position within the basic narrative structure" [30]. It may be said that Ishmael's self-construction and Ahab's whaling tragedy constitute two dynamic narratives within *Moby-Dick*—one implicit, one explicit; one primary, one secondary. They both contrast with and complement one another, subtly revealing Melville's paradoxical view of life: self-exploration is intermingled with ordeal, and destruction contains within it self-construction.

5. Conclusion

By narrating the developmental process of Ishmael's self-formation, Melville not only achieves a historic innovation in the narrative aesthetics of the American Bildungsroman but also elevates the theme of development to new heights. Through the narrative framework of the American Adam myth, Melville connects Ishmael's developmental trajectory with the destiny of the American nation. By further introducing narrative strategies such as cyclical-progressive developmental time and the construction of an ambiguous developing subject, Melville not only expands the tradition of narrative aesthetics in the American Bildungsroman but also suggests that individual development—and, by extension, the national development it reflects—is characterized by spiral complexities and paradox.

It may be said that in chronicling Ishmael's journey from despair to rebirth, Melville simultaneously poses profound inquiries and bold speculations regarding how this nascent nation might "seek its own identity." Since *Moby-Dick* began to receive widespread scholarly attention in the early twentieth century, prominent American writers such as William Faulkner (1897–1962) and Cormac McCarthy (1933–2023) have revered it as a paradigm for novelistic creation, emulating its narrative aesthetics of Ishmael's development. If we regard the canonical American Bildungsroman across generations as constituting an evolving literary tradition, then we must not overlook the transformation that Ishmael's developmental narrative in *Moby-Dick* brings to this lineage. Through the creation of the figure Ishmael, Melville not only participates in the construction of the narrative tradition of the American Bildungsroman but also historically transforms and expands that tradition.

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