Reading Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*

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### Abstract

“Reading Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*” focuses on the epistemological commentary embedded within Melville’s greatest novel. In presenting readers with a work in which the metaphysical meanings of life and the universe are relative rather than absolute, Melville challenges the belief in certain truths which had been inherent in the American epistemological tradition from the religious views of the country’s first Puritans settlers to the Romantic ideas of the transcendental thinkers of Melville’s own time. Within this tradition, Melville acts as an intellectual mouthpiece for his nation’s assumptions about knowledge and truth, and who stands as an early forerunner of literary modernism.

### Chapter 99 “The Doubloon”

There are many examples of Melville’s epistemological commentary in *Moby-Dick*, but perhaps the most explicit is found in Chapter 99, “The Doubloon.” In a previous chapter, Captain Ahab nails a gold doubloon to the main mast of his ship, a prize for the first sailor to sight the white whale. In Chapter 99, several crew members wander past the main mast and study the strange figures imprinted on the coin. Each sailor realizes that the coin is a symbolic object and explains the symbolism to himself before moving returning to work on deck.

> On its round border it bore the letters, REPUBLICA DEL ECUADOR: GUITO . . . Zoned by those letters you saw the likeness of three Arrows: summits, from one a flame, a tower on another, on the third a crowing cock; while arching over all was a segment of the partitioned zodiac, the signs all marked with their usual cabbalistics, and the keystone sun entering the equinocial point at Libra* (332).

Ahab says, “There’s something ever egotistical in mountain-tops and towers, and all other grand and lofty things; look here, —three peaks as proud as Lucifer. The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab; and this round gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician’s glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self” (332).

Starbuck says, “A dark valley between three mighty, beacon-shining peaks, that almost seem the Trinity, in some faint earthly symbol. So in this vale of Death, God girds us round; and over all our gloom, the sun of Righteousness still shines a beacon and a hope. If we bend down our eyes, the dark vale shows her mouldy soil; but if we lift them, the bright sun meets our glance half way, to cheer” (333).

Stubb says, “Look you, Doubloon, your zodiac here is the life of man in one round chapter; and now I’ll read it off, straight out of the book. . . . To begin, there’s Aries, or the Ram—lecherous dog, he begets us; then Taurus, or the Bull—he bumps us the first thing . . . when Aquarius, or the Water-bearer, pours out his whole deluge and drowns us; and, to wind up, with Pisces, or the Fishes, we sleep” (334).

Flask says, “I see nothing here, but a round thing made of gold, and whoever raises a certain whale, this round thing belongs to him. So, what’s all this staring been about? It is worth sixteen dollars, that’s true; and at two cents the cigar, that’s nine hundred and sixty cigars. I wont smoke dirty pipes like Stubb, but I like cigars, and here’s nine hundred and sixty of them, so here goes Flask aloft to spy ’em out” (334).

### The Doubloon and Epistemology

“The Doubloon” serves as an apt example with which to show both Melville’s specific epistemological idea, and also to show how that idea is situated within the American epistemological tradition.

Each of the characters who approaches the doubloon and studies its designs finds that the doubloon is symbolic of a truth. Ahab finds a representation of himself and his quest; Starbuck witnesses the holy Trinity and a sermon detailing mankind’s relationship with God; Stubb finds a satirical history of each man’s life; and Flask focuses on only the surface meaning, the worth of the coin. Each of these meanings seems valid, supported as they are by the details on the coin, and certainly each character believes that his interpretation is correct. However, each of these interpretations is a different truth arising from one unchanging text. The coin cannot be said to mean anything, since its meaning is relative to the character who is looking at it. Truth in “The Doubloon” is not absolute. It is created, imposed on the image of the coin by each observer.

In regard to the American epistemological tradition, the above explanation of “The Doubloon” resembles nothing so much as the overview of the Puritan, empirical, and transcendental epistemologies which were previously provided. Each of these three groups is simply another observer of an object, the universe in this case, trying to discover its meaning. The Puritans observe the world, and much like Starbuck they seek God. In contrast, the empiricists might be compared most closely to Flask, believing only the undeniable surface evidence, that to which their five senses attest. As in regard to the characters from the book, Melville does not disagree with any one of epistemologies alone, but rather with the certainty—with the attitude possessing the one right answer—which is inherent in each of their epistemologies.

### References


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