

embrace their passions rather than projecting them onto African Americans. Minstrelsy's final decline came later in the century as the civil rights movement successfully stigmatized the public stereotyping of African-American men.

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#### RELATED ENTRIES

African-American Manhood; Race; Slavery; Whiteness; Working-Class Manhood

—Elaine Frantz Parsons

## MOBY DICK

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick; or, The Whale* (1851) describes Captain Ahab of the whaling ship *Pequod* and his quest to kill the white whale that took his leg on an earlier whale hunt. This self-destructive mission ends with the death of Ahab and his crew, with the single exception of Ishmael, the book's narrator. The novel dramatizes the concerns of American middle-class men in the emerging capitalist marketplace of the mid-nineteenth century. The novel negotiates meanings of bourgeois manhood and same-sex relations, as well as man's precarious relationship to nature.

The characters of the novel and their relations with one another represent two models of Victorian manhood: (1) the traditional ideal of "artisanal" manhood, defined through small-producer values, economic autonomy, and self-sufficiency; and (2) an emerging ideal of "entrepreneurial" manhood, defined by competitive individualism, the exploitation of natural resources, and control over other men in the workplace. Artisanal manhood is represented by

Ishmael, who goes to sea to escape from urban alienation, and Queequeg, a South Sea islander and harpooner. The two men are joined in a sentimental, homoerotic relationship that enables them to resist Ahab and the entrepreneurial manliness he represents. Ahab's first mate, Starbuck, shares Ishmael and Queequeg's commitment to artisanal manhood, but his attraction to entrepreneurial manhood and desire for economic gain make it impossible for him to resist the madness of the captain's quest.

While Ahab represents the destructive potential of mid-nineteenth-century entrepreneurial capitalism, the white whale represents nature. The purpose of the *Pequod* is to hunt sperm whales for their oil, or "sperm." By means of the whale hunt, capitalist enterprise symbolically converts the masculine erotic energy of nature—represented by the sperm—into cash. Ahab's quest for revenge, however, leads the crew beyond its capitalist purpose of exploiting nature for pecuniary gain and on a path toward the destruction of ship and crew.

In *Moby Dick*, the homoerotic bond between Ishmael and Queequeg serves as the foundation for a radical social critique of capitalist economics and commodity fetishism. The socially and sexually transgressive relation between the two men, who share a bed and undergo a "marriage" ceremony, has liberating potential. Initially drawn to Ahab, Ishmael separates himself from the murderous crusade through his bond with Queequeg. Ishmael and Queequeg's relationship challenges the violently coercive entrepreneurial masculinity and phallic power represented by Captain Ahab, and the noncompetitive union of the two men becomes the foundation for a re-examination of men's relation to one another, and to nature. In the end, only Ishmael survives at sea by using Queequeg's coffin as a flotation device. Queequeg's symbolic reaching out to Ishmael from his own death is suggestive of the maternal love and devotion that Victorian middle-class Americans considered necessary to men's spiritual salvation.

*Moby Dick* can thus be read as a homoerotic, sentimental critique of bourgeois entrepreneurial manhood, which sustains and perpetuates itself through the exploitation of natural resources and the domination of other men in the workplace. The novel contains a plea for an ideal of artisanal manhood and the need to resist the forces of entrepreneurial capitalism. While the novel suggests that men could prevail over forces of economic change, it also conveys Melville's pessimism about the impact of capitalism on American masculinity.

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#### RELATED ENTRIES

- Artisan; Body; Capitalism; Homosexuality; Individualism; Industrialization; Market Revolution; Mother–Son Relationships; Patriarchy; Property; Sentimentalism; Victorian Era; Violence  
—Thomas Winter

## MOMISM

The “momism” critique, a scathing attack on American mothers during World War II and the early Cold War, asserted that the nation’s young men lacked the rugged, independent character possessed by their forefathers and necessary to national strength. Popular writers and psychiatric experts blamed pathological moms who “smother-loved” their children, particularly their boys. They viewed the phenomenon as uniquely American, and largely confined to the middle class.

Momism was rooted in a male reaction to the modernization of gender roles. In the early twentieth century, as women entered the competitive realms of paid labor and politics (achieving national suffrage in 1920), men increasingly

questioned the Victorian belief in female moral superiority and challenged the assumption that mother love was a wholly benevolent force. Whereas Victorians had believed that boys became self-governing men by internalizing the moral mother, modern experts began to regard such internalization as an obstacle to healthy masculinity.

Hostility toward maternal influence reached its zenith in the 1940s, and was expressed most memorably by the popular writer Philip Wylie. Wylie coined the term momism after witnessing a Mother’s Day spectacle: a division of soldiers spelling, in formation, “MOM.” To Wylie, the soldiers’ tribute suggested that American men were more skilled at sentimental gestures than heroic acts. In his 1942 bestseller, *Generation of Vipers*, Wylie argued that the decline of manly labor, the saccharine character of radio programming, and the influence of women’s clubs all pointed to encroaching momism. During World War II, Wylie’s satiric critique resonated with commentators who worried that American men seemed “soft” compared to their fascist enemies.

In the postwar period, psychiatrists and social scientists lent momism a degree of scientific legitimacy by employing it as a kind of diagnosis. In a 1946 bestseller, *Their Mothers’ Sons*, the psychiatrist Edward Strecker attributed the high incidence of neuropsychiatric disorders among U.S. draftees and servicemen to widespread maternal pathology. Likewise, in *Childhood and Society* (1950), émigré psychoanalyst Erik Erikson analyzed “Mom” as a distinctive national prototype, the American counterpart to the authoritarian German father. Experts were especially anxious about the role that mothers played in fostering male homosexuality, which became widely associated with communism during the Cold War. To stave off this threat, they urged fathers to forge closer relationships with their sons, portraying engaged fatherhood as the cornerstone of democratic manhood. They also promoted groups like the Boy Scouts that allowed boys to escape the presumably suffocating confines of domesticity.

Historians have tended to view the momism critique as part of an antifeminist movement that sought to re-establish stable gender roles after World War II. Indeed, the critique was decidedly misogynist, and it fueled the rampant homophobia of the postwar era. But its political implications were actually complex. Many liberals, both men and women, supported Wylie’s attack on moms, viewing it as an assault on moral hypocrisy, sexual repression, and intolerance. In the 1960s, feminists such as Betty Friedan appropriated the derogatory stereotype of the neurotic suburban mother to argue that women’s energies should no longer be confined to the home.