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Corpses, Fire, and Dangerous Mammals: Revisiting the Symbols in Roddam's Television Adaptation of *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at discussing the visual symbols as well as aspects such as the acting performances, the historical accuracy, the teleplay, and the direction in Franc Roddam's 1998 television miniseries *Moby Dick*, adapted from Herman Melville's homonymous novel (1851). The two-part television production incorporates a few symbolic elements not necessarily present in the source text. These symbols (the image of a dog, the evocation of a giant, a whale-shaped mark, a great fire and an underwater corpse) are visually associated with characters as diverse as Elijah, Ahab, Queequeg and Moby Dick. The investigation focuses thus on the possible interpretations suggested by these visual symbols and how they contribute to better our comprehension not only of these characters but also of the novel's complex themes of death, power, evil, redemption, among others.

RESUMO

O presente trabalho objetiva discutir os símbolos visuais bem como aspetos tais como as atuações, a reconstituição de época, a roteirização e a realização relativamente à minissérie de televisão *Moby Dick* (1998), uma adaptação da obra homónima de Herman Melville, realizada por Franc Roddam. A produção televisiva, dividida em dois episódios, incorpora certos elementos simbólicos não necessariamente presentes no texto-fonte. Esses símbolos (a imagem de um cão, a evocação de um gigante, uma marca em forma de baleia, um incêndio de grandes proporções e um cadáver submerso) são visualmente associados a personagens tão diversas quanto Elijah, Ahab, Queequeg e Moby Dick. A investigação enfoca, portanto, as possíveis interpretações sugeridas por esses símbolos visuais e como eles contribuem para aprimorar a nossa compreensão de tais personagens e de temas complexos abordados no romance como a morte, o poder, o mal, a redenção, entre outros.

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I – INTRODUCTION

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) has caused to develop academic industries focused on every bit of minutiae that could be unturned as well as great amounts of scholarly investigation and criticism (Buell 359, 383; Marrs 3). As expected, many studies on the fascinating prose of Melville's novel and its numerous adaptations, translations and recreations already exist. One of these adaptations which has become arguably quite canonical is John Huston's 1956 version. However, when it comes to telefilm, academic interest in Franc Roddam's adaptation of *Moby Dick* (1998) appears to be lacking.

While preparing for the role of Ahab in Roddam's telefilm, the English actor Patrick Stewart concluded that this American classic left him feeling that "whatever it's about, it's not about a man trying to kill a whale" (Hill 1). He is certainly joined by a great many critics who have discussed and examined all the mythical and allegorical implications of the monomaniacal captain's chase after the great white whale (Buell 358–360).

This Australian and British co-production starring Patrick Stewart presents "a sensibility so straightforward and old-fashioned" (James 28) that it deserves some investigation, if for no other reason, than to appreciate the fact that it collaborated to popularize even more a rather epic and symbolic narrative. Having gathered momentum and soon climbed to the top of television ratings in a cable channel that reaches "72 million homes in the United States and abroad" (Marks 4), the *Moby Dick* telefilm breathed new life into one of the greatest American novels.

As previously mentioned, my focus for this paper will be on the intricate nature of symbolic representations in the television adaptation. More specifically, I expect to shed light on some apparently symbolic aspects of the production by proposing a reading based on cultural studies of these audiovisual elements. As we shall see in more detail shortly, sequences involving Melville's characters such as Elijah, Ahab, Queequeg and Moby Dick incorporate a number of symbols not originally included in the novel. These elements appear to have been introduced in the made-for-TV movie by the teleplay writers not only to enrich the storytelling but also to suggest new associations for the perceptive viewer.

My interest here is not to investigate the already much-studied literary symbols of the novel *Moby Dick*. My analysis focuses on symbolic details not necessarily present in the book but (re-) created and presented by the 1998 audiovisual adaptation. Although some of them are not given in the source text, these televisual symbols are coherent with the novel and they suggest slightly different interpretations of Melville's characters and situations.

II – CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

However, before going any further, I would like to present a very brief notion of symbol used in this study in order to avoid any terminological conflicts. A visual symbol in a film (or a telefilm, for that matter) consists in "an object or image that both represents itself and suggests a meaning that is apart from its own objective reality" (Beaver 260). In other words, a symbol is basically an image which conventionally denotes something else (Martin 118). When it comes to film, thus, every reality, event or gesture is a symbol or, more precisely, a sign, to a great extent (Martin 117). All that is shown on the screen is significant and, in general terms, it has a secondary sense that might not appear until one ponders its implications: one might consider that an image *implies* more than it explains (Martin 117). By the same token, a symbolic object introduced in a film "carries a literal reality and a suggestive meaning of a more abstract reality" (Beaver 260).

In several cases, a symbolic relationship between an object or an image and its abstract or symbolic meaning is created by plot association. But, in other instances, "symbols may contain references that are universally or conventionally accepted as such" (Beaver 260). Most fine films could be read in several levels, depending on the viewer's affection, intellect, sensitivity, imagination and culture (Martin 117). As we shall see soon, the merit of such films is that they go beyond the immediate dependence on the dramatization of an action — no matter how deep and humanly captivating it is — to suggest feelings or ideas in a more general sense (Martin 117–118). Also, it is worth characterizing the material object investigated and specifying the method employed in this study.

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III – MATERIAL AND METHOD

Apart from TV sketches, parodies or cartoons, the telefilm *Moby Dick*, directed by Franc Roddam, up to the late 1990s, was arguably one of the first serious attempts at adapting Melville's great American novel into an immensely popular medium such as television. The telefilm was broadcast by the American TV conglomerate USA Network in 1998. It was aired in two segments with commercials on Sunday, May 15, from 8 to 10 p.m., concluding its adventure the following night (May 16) at the same time. Roddam adapted the source text for the screen with the collaboration of Anton Diether, whom he had previously worked with in the ABC production *Cleopatra* (1999). Although it is technically a miniseries (broadcast in two episodes), the director and the producers always refer to it as a (made-for-TV) film, which prompts us to analyze it using certain parameters of a regular film, but without dismissing its particular TV context of production. Roddam's *Moby Dick* was filmed in Australia at the Point Cook Royal Australian Airforce base, just across the Port Phillip Bay from Melbourne (McMurria 246; Lavery 98–99). The miniseries was produced by Francis Ford Coppola and Robert Halmi. The cast includes Henry Thomas (Ishmael), Piripi Waretini (Queequeg), Patrick Stewart (Ahab), Ted Levine (Starbuck), Gregory Peck (Father Mapple), Hugh Keays-Byrne (Mr. Stubb), Dominic Purcell (Bulkington), Bruce Spence (Elijah), among others.

In what follows, I shall briefly discuss certain aspects of the 1998 *Moby Dick* adaptation (the acting performances, the historical accuracy, the visual symbols, the teleplay writing and direction, among others). I examine how Roddam faced the challenge of including in such a "rousing family entertainment" (James 28) a series of symbolic elements and creatures suggestive of some of Melville's troubling themes such as death, evil, rebellion, purification, the afterlife, the unknown, among others. Specifically, I focus on particular images or details shown in the production such as a stray dog accompanying Elijah, a promethean giant evoked by Ahab, a whale-shaped mark introduced by Queequeg, the flames consuming the Pequod after a collision with Moby Dick, and the captain's body sinking. I argue that all these images could be interpreted symbolically.

In terms of method, the analysis of the symbols produced by the television adaptation was carried out by identifying patterns of image symbolism in conjunction with plot associations (Martin; Beaver). The proposed model for analysis draws upon theories from Narratology and Translation/Adaptation Studies (Cahir; Cartmell; Cléder and Jullier). More specifically, the nonverbal system of symbols created by the television production, which materialized in a series of "translation" shifts between source novel and adaptation, was examined through intersemiotic analyses and interpreted by means of insights from cultural studies (Cirlot; Chevalier and Gheerbrant).

IV – DISCUSSION

As mentioned above, save for a few women in minor roles appearing at the Spouter-Inn, the cast is entirely male. Among these diverse actors, the miniseries casts Gregory Peck to play the famous Father Mapple, the chaplain of the stormy New Bedford community. A much older Peck climbs on the pulpit shaped like a ship's prow to deliver his sermon, appropriately based on the parable of Jonah, more than 40 years after starring in John Huston's 1956 adaptation of *Moby Dick* (screenplay by Huston and Ray Bradbury). In that occasion, Father Mapple was played by Orson Welles and Peck arguably executed an absorbing performance as captain Ahab. And, in many ways, "Peck's portrayal [of Ahab] has become difficult to eclipse" (Dowling 61). In this 1998 production, an 81-year-old Peck returns to the Melvillian universe to incarnate a Father Mapple of "a certain venerable robustness" (Melville 46), as the novelist puts it. The fact that Peck chased after Moby Dick with his diabolical harpoon when he played Ahab in the 1956 version causes Ishmael's description of this experienced chaplain to sound incredibly true: "he had been a sailor and a harpooneer [*sic*] in his youth" (Melville 46). This small part was the last one in the long career of Gregory Peck, who died in 2003.

The Father Mapple sequence looks relatively close to the source novel. However, the teleplay writer and the director seem to have taken a few liberties with the screen transposition of certain segments of the story such as, for instance, the Chapter 19 ("The Prophet"). This portion of the novel details Queequeg and Ishmael's encounter with a "beggar-like stranger" called Elijah (Melville 88). Elijah is described as "shabbily apparelled in faded jacket and patched trowsers [*sic*]" and with extensive facial scarring due to smallpox (Melville 86). He alludes to

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a dire fate should Ishmael and Queequeg join Ahab, whom he refers to as the "Old Thunder" (Melville 87). Also, briefly in Chapter 21 ("Going Aboard"), Ishmael and Queequeg are provoked again by the same ragged prophet. He bids both seamen farewell and says that they will meet again in The Last Judgment: "Shan't see ye again very soon, I guess; unless it's before the Grand Jury" (Melville 91). Ishmael comments that "the sight of him [Elijah] struck me so" and adds that Elijah's "ambiguous, half-hinting, half-revealing, shrouded sort of talk, now begat in me all kinds of vague wonderments and half-apprehensions" (Melville 88).

Nonetheless, when this passage is transposed to television, part of this ambiguity is lost, as we shall see in more detail shortly. Elijah is played by the actor Bruce Spence. This New Zealand-born Australian actor is famous for playing some odd-looking characters such as the Mouth of Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003), the Trainman in *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003), the alien Tion Medon in *Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith* (2005), to name just a few. As expected, Spence brings all his unconventional physicality to the role of Elijah in Roddam's *Moby Dick*. The problem, however, seems to be with the text, which goes above and beyond Melville's novel.

In the miniseries, when Elijah is informed by Ishmael that he and Queequeg are signed to sail with the Pequod and captain Ahab, this ragged prophet starts to sound eerily. He says: "Well, what's to be will be. Then again, perhaps you won't... Anyhow, it's all fixed. All been arranged. Has been for a long time" (Roddam). Intrigued and a little upset, Ishmael exclaims: "What? What's been fixed? What are you blathering about?" Then Elijah explicitly states that both sailors are in for a deadly surprise at the end of such an ominous voyage: "The prophecy, matey! The prophecy of the Pequod! *All about her will perish. Save one man. All but one*. Didn't you know that, did you, maties? ... All but one! All but one!" (Roddam, Emphasis added).

Such a prophecy, inserted in the first 22 minutes of the pilot episode of a three-hour-long miniseries, feels more like a spoiler because it gives away pivotal details of the conclusion of the plot. Unlike Melville's suggestive passage in the novel, which is ambiguous and "half-hinting, half-revealing" (Melville 88), the miniseries in this particular point leaves nothing to the audience's imagination. Elijah's oversharing tendency would be "corrected" in the next television adaptation (2011). In the Canadian-German production, directed by Mike Barker, the prophet is played by Billy Boyd. He only makes the more generic prediction that "Ahab [enacted by William Hurt] will lead you to your watery grave" (Barker), but he does not disclose that only one person will survive like in both the 1956 and 1998 versions. Also, this specific sentence is a little difficult to hear because of the overlapping voices in the busy wharf and the fact that Elijah utters it off-camera when Ishmael (Charlie Cox) and Starbuck (Ethan Hawke) are boarding the Pequod.

Even though this is the 1998 televisual adaptation of a nineteenth-century classic that has been read by generations now, the decision to unveil beforehand that there will be only one survivor in the Pequod's whaling journey might come across as an unnecessary strategy. In the book, the narrator himself only fully discloses the death of all the crewmembers in the final pages of the novel and in the "Epilogue", in which Ishmael quotes Job's maxim "And I only am escaped alone to tell thee" (Melville 427). Given the early dissemination of such a crucial plot element of the production, a standard viewer could infer that the only survivor is Ishmael since he narrates the story in flashback mode, by sharing his personal memories of previous events. Elijah's explicit prophecy in the TV production, as well as in the 1956 version, thus seems to spoil the ending of the adventure.

However, the way Melville's *Moby Dick* is retold, reimagined and changed in this new medium appears to reveal a certain amount of creativity on the adapters' part, especially when it comes to the use of symbols. The TV incarnation of Elijah, as opposed to the same character in the novel, cuddles a little stray dog. In general, prophets, especially the ones of an Islamic persuasion, would not want to be associated with such animals (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 243). A possible explanation behind the inclusion of the stray dog, which is nonexistent in the source text and in its other adaptations, might be the aesthetic intentions of the artists in charge of the television production. One might even say that this animal serves some sort of symbolic function in the audiovisual composition of the sequence.

As Martin has explained, the use of a symbol in a film consists of resorting to an image capable of suggesting to the viewer something more than the mere perception of what the apparent

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content could offer him or her (118). As for the film image, one might distinguish both a *manifest* and a *latent content* (or, respectively, an *explicit* and an *implicit* content), in which the former can be readily legible, and the latter could eventually have the symbolic meaning intended by the director and/or seen by the viewer (Martin 118). In this particular case, the scene includes images whose explicit content is the manifest, visual presence of a dog. And it is also a recurring image because it appears at least twice: the dog accompanies Elijah when he spots Ahab, Fedallah and his men secretly boarding the Pequod in the middle of the night and, later, when he confronts Ishmael and Queequeg. This recurrent, manifest image of a dog might have a latent content and potentially imply a conventionally symbolic interpretation.

A dog is a very complex and ambivalent symbol when it comes to the arts and the culture in general. A number of cultural studies often associates the dog with its so-called psychopomp nature, which means that these canids are believed in some cultures to be the "guide of man throughout death's night, after having accompanied him during life's day" (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 239, Translation mine).[1] The ancient Egyptian god Anubis and other mythological beings such as Cerberus are just two examples of the vast amount of canine or semicanine entities that are often associated with death, the afterlife and the underworld. Frequently seen as faithful companions, dogs are believed to be destined to escort the souls of their masters (as well as souls in general) into the eternal life (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 239).

The inclusion of the stray dog into Roddam's miniseries does not seem thus to be gratuitous. It also serves a much different purpose than the dog inserted in the 1926 adaptation, *The Sea Beast*. This silent drama, directed by Millard Webb, is the first adaptation of *Moby Dick* (Hall 1). In this very popular black-and-white production, a younger Ahab "Ceeley" (John Barrymore) gives his sweetheart Esther (Dolores Costello), a small dog before he sets sails in a whaling ship with his treacherous half-brother, Derek (George O'Hara). The pup is placed in a basket and Ahab tells Esther, through intertitles obviously, that "His name's Ezekial. On week days call him Zeke" (Webb). A number of years later, during which Ahab is pushed overboard by his envious half-brother, is maimed by Moby Dick, loses the love of his life, takes revenge on Derek and kills the sea beast, Ahab is ready to be reunited with Esther. When he gets to the white picket fence of her home in New Bedford, an older and larger Zeke recognizes him and welcomes him home in much the same way as the old dog Argos identifies his long-lost master Ulysses in Homer's *Odyssey*. Webb's interpretive construction of the faithful dog Ezekial/Zeke clearly invites us to think of Ahab symbolically as an epic hero who, after so many typhoons, sea monsters and tribulations, deserves to be happy with the love of his life.

But the inclusion of the dog seems to serve a different purpose in Roddam's 1998 television production. The fact that it is a stray — an animal which is wandering at large or is lost or unwanted — might also be significant. What is meaningful too is the fact that it is very close to Elijah. As Martin has asserted, the symbolic meaning of an image depends a lot on its confrontation with the other nearby images (117). Curiously enough, this is the only adaptation in which Elijah is accompanied by a dog. The pup gives the impression that it was inserted in this particular scene *with* the ragged prophet for symbolic reasons. The presence of the dog appears to symbolize an ill omen, a kind of dark premonition which is linked to the content of Elijah's prophecy. The teleplay writers must have combined his overall literary description (beggar-like appearance, bad teeth, facial disfigurement, hoarse voice, pointed finger) with such a tiny detail (a dog which might symbolize psychopomp powers) that did not exist in the novel in order to add subtle overtones for the perceptive viewer.

However, although the ragged prophet's sinister forewarning deliberately discloses a key plot point in the beginning of the film, the sequence displays a degree of creativity by incorporating Bruce Spence's bizarre characterization and the dog as a symbol, which reinforces Elijah's ill-omened message full of death and destruction, but also salvation in this life or the next. Though a minor character, Elijah is a significant figure because Melville's very choice of his name was quite special. The novelist chose such a name for the reason that it carries deep symbolisms in many ancient religious traditions, including the Christian, in which Elijah is a powerful biblical prophet who denounces the King of Israel's crimes. This feared ruler's name was Ahab, the character who inspired Melville to name his despotic captain.

1 "guide de l'homme dans la nuit de la mort, après avoir été son compagnon dans le jour de la vie" (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 239).

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As for Ahab, the casting of Sir Patrick Stewart might have been due to his previous performances as the legendary intergalactic captain Jean-Luc Picard in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–94). Although they are different, there are some parallels between captains Picard and Ahab in terms of the themes of vengeance and of an enormous desire to explore the mysteries of the universe. There are explicit references to *Moby Dick* in the franchise film *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996), in which captain Picard, played by Stewart, quotes directly from the Chapter 41 (titled "Moby Dick") of the novel. Shortly after reciting these lines of the book — "He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the … rage and hate felt by his whole race" (Melville 156) — on board the *USS Enterprise-E* starship, Stewart was offered the lead role in Roddam's miniseries.

For eight months Stewart immersed "in the world of Herman Melville preparing for the 'role of a lifetime' as Ahab" (Lavery 99). He inhabits the protagonist "as if the character were his birthright" (Roberts 484). Stewart's performance also benefits from his extensive experience with Shakespearean drama and his rendition of the captain of the Pequod "assumes a volatile Lear-like manner" (James 28). Given that Melville "transposed *Macbeth* and *King Lear* into his own literary universe" when he wrote *Moby Dick* (Buell 385), one might say that Stewart seems to have incorporated this classic tragedy dimension of the character. Dowling claims that "Stewart's Ahab brilliantly captures the sentimental speech expressing his aching lament over being trapped by his irrational hatred of the whale" in such a manner that its "rhythms echo those of Othello's cracked and painful speeches lamenting the loss of … [his] former wife" (Dowling 56). He brings thus substance and emotion to his interpretation of the "Old Thunder." Other factor that also causes Stewart to be "certainly adequate as the Pequod's captain" is the fact that he is "closer in age than [Gregory] Peck to Ahab and suitably scarred and wizened" (Lavery 99). His maturity collaborates to present viewers with a different facet of the "steely-willed" commander that hijacks the Pequod for his own narcissistic purposes. Although Gregory Peck's Ahab was a tough act to follow, Stewart arguably projects a more heartbreaking version of a "self-tortured Ahab" who, for the first time on screen, weeps and expresses his helplessness to "alter the fatal course of his own design" (Dowling 56).

His performance as Ahab might also invite us to think of the Pequod's captain in symbolic terms, especially in the sequence based on Chapter 108 ("Ahab and the Carpenter"). In the novel, the carpenter of the Pequod replaces Ahab's prosthetic leg in front of the blacksmith's forge while the captain declaims his Prometheus speech. He is very angry and frustrated by his dependence on others. But, in his delusions of grandeur, Ahab declares he would like to order Prometheus his ideal version of the "complete man", who would be made according to a pattern of his desire:

> fifty feet high in his socks; then, chest modelled after the Thames Tunnel; then, legs with roots to 'em, to stay in one place; then, arms three feet through the wrist; no heart at all, brass forehead, and about a quarter of an acre of fine brains; and let me see — shall I order eyes to see outwards? No, but put a sky-light on top of his head to illuminate inwards (Melville 359).

In the TV miniseries the scene does not take place on the deck of the vessel, but more privately in the captain's cabin. Although Stewart's Ahab is a little less grandiloquent than the literary character, one might say that he recites the lines above with a poignant sense of Shakespearean tragedy. Instead of ordering the "complete man", as in Melville's text, Ahab in the miniseries says he wishes Prometheus had made him according to his desirable pattern. His teary eyes and gloomy expression seem to convey the irony of wishing to be such a "grand, ungodly, god-like man" (Melville 78) while imprisoned inside a "crippled" body. In the TV production he says: "Prometheus should have made me. What's made with fire belongs in the fire … Like a Greek god. Greek god! I stand on this broken stick of an old bone" (Roddam).

The cameras are positioned to show a variety of close-ups, medium and long shots. The scene starts with a close-up of Ahab's whalebone leg and then a long shot reveals the carpenter (played by Australian actor Norman Yemm) on his knees working on the prosthesis, while the Pequod's captain is shown standing tall. To reinforce the contrast between the kneeling carpenter and the standing Ahab, the director had Steward with his arms up, holding on to the grates in the ceiling. One might say that, in this long shot, Ahab looks like a relatively "grand, ungodly, god-like man" standing tall next to a shorter, inferior "mortal."

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These long shots that seem to reinforce the disproportion between the knelt-down carpenter and the captain's superior stature invite us to think of Ahab symbolically in terms of a giant. In nearly all symbolic traditions, the giant "tends to appear as an outcropping of the marvelous and the terrible, even though he always has a certain quality of the inferior or the subordinate about him" (Cirlot 118). In a sense, Ahab represents these contrasting features because he is defined by the pious captain Peleg not only as "grand" and "god-like" but also as "ungodly." Ahab can be very fragile, especially since he was subjugated by Moby Dick, but he can also incarnate the "Old Thunder" and be extremely terrible and powerful.

As for the symbolism of the giant, suggested by the television camerawork that I touched on above, Cirlot adds that the "Christian tradition has often seen Satan as a giant" (118). In his strong desire for vengeance against the "monstrousest parmacetty" that "devoured, chewed up, [and] crunched" (Melville 72) his leg, Ahab can also be diabolical and even christen a "malignant iron" in the harpooners' blood while invoking the Devil: "ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!" (Melville 372). When Roddam's cameras place Patrick Stewart as such a tall man, with his hands up touching the ceiling, there seems to be a suggestion that Ahab might feel like a giant in his larger-than-life chase after the Albino sperm whale.

Although we do not get to see an actual representation of a giant onscreen, the symbol seems to be suggested by the asymmetrical position of the characters, Stewart/Ahab's gestures and the content of the lines he delivers. All these features, combined with the details of the narrative plot, cause us to associate him symbolically with a gigantic figure in this scene. One might say that, even though a giant is not properly seen, it is vividly *evoked* by the *mise-en-scène*. Martin believes that a symbol could be evoked in a film and its elicitation would be one of the "purest" forms of symbolization (126). Put differently, the least it is seen, fabricated or artificially conceived, the more the symbol will mean and, consequently, it will achieve a better and a more impressive result (Martin 134).

In the 1998 *Moby Dick*, the camera moves then to show, in a medium close-up, Ahab placing his open hands up vertically on top of his head as if he were holding a crown or a halo. A similar effect is created in the Barker's 2011 adaptation, in which a light serves as a halo to surround the head of William Hurt's Ahab. In this moment, Patrick Stewart's Ahab is describing how Prometheus should have made him more like a Greek god, with a skylight atop his head, lightening up "a whole acre of brains" (Roddam). This scene appears to suggest that, in that instant, Ahab sees himself as an enormous Greek god or as some sort of "fifty feet high" Titan. To borrow Cirlot's words and to relate them to this magnified version of Ahab, the "giant may be a symbol of 'everlasting rebellion', of the forces of dissatisfaction which grow within Man and determine his history and his destiny; it may … be a symbol of the Universal Man" (118). The TV director might be inviting all these symbolic associations (marvelous and terrible entity, the Devil, the rebel, the forces of dissatisfaction, the Universal Man) when he places the Pequod's captain in such a high position in the visual field of the screen.

The only man aboard the Pequod with enough stamina to question such a heartbroken narcissistic "giant" is the first mate Starbuck. In Roddam's miniseries, he is played by the American actor Ted Levine, who "gives a solidly powerful, modulated performance" (James 28). He was cast to play the chief officer of the whaling ship following his interpretation of the second mate Mr. Stubb in an avant-garde theatrical adaptation of the novel (Hill 1) and his successful performance as the deranged serial killer Jame "Buffalo Bill" Gumb in Jonathan Demme's 1991 *The Silence of the Lambs*. His almost sinister countenance and his Quaker ascetic forbearance onscreen prove him to be the only force capable, at least for a while, of counterbalancing Ahab's authoritarianism. And Levine is arguably the most confrontational Starbuck of all adaptations. The teleplay cowriter Anton Diether asserted that, when they wrote Levine's part, the intention was "to complete the arc of a character whom I truly wanted to make more assertive and stronger than Melville's passive Starbuck" (Cahir 24). As a loving husband, father, and family provider to "his young Cape [Cod] wife and child" (Melville 102), he is the shipwreck victim who had the most to lose. But not even this more combative Starbuck can talk some sense into such a symbolic giant like Ahab, who overpowers all aboard.

But before discussing further symbolic implications associated with other crewmembers of the Pequod, a few comments must be made about how the miniseries portrays aspects of the historical past. Diether and Roddam took some creative liberties with the interpretive

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reconstruction of the Pequod organization. The film includes a few historical inaccuracies like, for instance, the fact that, in the miniseries, the harpooners Queequeg, Tashtego and Dagoo bunk with the rest of the crew. Because these professionals had essential whaling skills, as outlined in Chapter 33 ("The Specksynder") (Melville 125–126), they were historically treated as a privileged group: "Not the equals of the officers, but certainly superior to the common mates, they were normally given bunks in the steerage section of the ship, between the forecastle where the crew lived and the cabins where the officials lived" (Cahir 22).

In an effort to contemplate Melville's diverse set of characters, the 1998 miniseries selected a more international and multiethnic cast. One noteworthy mention among them is the Maori actor Piripi Waretini, who plays the harpooner Queequeg. Waretini immersed in the Moby Dick universe by doing research and writing a Master of Arts thesis on Melville (Lavery 99). Being an indigenous Polynesian like the literary Queequeg, he seems to look more convincing than the Austro-Hungarian Friedrich von Ledebur who played the Maori harpooner in John Huston's 1956 version of *Moby Dick*. Ledebur, with his feeble pale body, does not look savage enough to interpret a Polynesian cannibal. Piripi Waretini, on the other hand, appears to incarnate Queequeg. The following adaptations — Trey Stokes' *2010: Moby Dick* (2010) and Mike Barker's *Moby Dick* (2011) — also cast less convincing Queequegs: Michael Teh and Raoul Max Trujillo, respectively.

In the televisual transposition from page to screen, there is a slight alteration involving Queequeg that might be significant. In the Chapter 18 ("His Mark") of the novel, the narrator observes that when captain Peleg gets everything ready for Queequeg's signing, the savage, whom he mistakenly calls "Quohog", copies upon the paper "a queer round figure" (Melville 85). As the harpooner cannot write, the mark he leaves on the ship's papers, according to the symbol shown in the 1851 English and American printings of the novel, is that of a cross (Melville 85). Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford, the editors of the Norton's 150th Anniversary Edition of *Moby Dick*, argue that the cross "was probably supplied by the original typesetter *in place of the figure in the manuscript*" (Melville 85, Emphasis added). In other words, the cross inserted by the typesetter in the first edition does not seem to reflect Melville's own description of Queequeg's mark (Frankel 135–138), which is "a queer round figure" (Melville 85). It seems commonsensical enough that a cross is hardly a queer round figure (Hayes 51).

The television production, however, chose to alter his mark. Instead of drawing a cross on Peleg's papers, the televisual Queequeg almost childishly draws a "queer round figure" that, in an extreme close-up shot of the page, resembles a whale or the infinity symbol (∞). Similar sign had already been used in the 1956 adaptation as well. In a sense, one might consider that the 1998 miniseries (and Huston's film), in this particular scene, follows Melville's source text more closely. This adds a further complication for literature purists who tend to dismiss audiovisual adaptations of canonical masterpieces by stating that they are never "faithful" enough to the source text or that the book is always necessarily better than the movie. In this case, it becomes clear that the mark introduced by Queequeg in Roddam's miniseries is more "faithful" to Melville's manuscript than the one inserted by nineteenth-century Christian typesetters in the very first edition of the novel.

But before going any further, I would like to consider for a moment the teleplay writers' apparent decision to include the whale symbol in the miniseries. Chevalier and Gheerbrant believe that, roughly speaking, a whale could be a

> symbol of the *container* and, according to its content, a symbol of the *hidden treasure* or sometimes of a *threatening misfortune* as well, the whale invariably conceals the changeability of the unknown and of the invisible interior; it is the matrix of all the opposites that might come into existence. There has been also a comparison between its ovoid mass and the conjunction of the two arcs of a circle, which symbolize the world from above and the one from below, heaven and Earth (103, Translation mine).[2]

2 "symbole du *contenant* et, selon son contenu, symbole du *trésor caché* ou parfois aussi du *malheur menaçant*, la baleine recèle toujours la polyvalence de l'inconnu et de l'intérieur invisible; elle est le siège de tous les opposés, qui peuvent surgir à l'existence. Aussi a-t-on comparé sa masse ovoïde à la conjonction de deux arcs de cercle, qui symbolisent le monde d'en haut et celui d'en bas, le ciel et la terre" (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 103).

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With that definition in mind, Queequeg's mark in Roddam's telefilm might invite us to think of his whale in terms of a symbol with deeply metaphysical implications. The whole novel in general, and specifically sections such as "Etimology", "Extracts", Chapters 32 ("Cetology"), 41 ("Moby Dick"), 42 ("The Whiteness of the Whale"), 74 ("The Sperm Whale's Head — Contrasted View), to name a few, are clearly devoted to an investigation into the symbolic and philosophical meanings of the whale. I would argue that Queequeg's mark might suggest that, by identifying himself as a whale in captain Peleg's documents, the harpooner relinquishes his body and soul to an unknown destiny. His action of equating himself with a whale in his signature on paper might intimate that, once aboard the Pequod, his soul is ready to face any treasures or misfortunes that may arise from heaven or Earth. As noted above, Queequeg's nearly childish mark also resembles the infinity symbol, which denotes faith in the afterlife and that, come what may, his life might be redeemed and reborn anew just like the biblical Jonah found salvation in the stomach of a whale.

And whatever fate or destiny the future may hold for Queequeg, that future will certainly impact Ishmael, his "bosom friend" (Melville 56). All we think we know about Queequeg — and everything else in the novel for that matter — comes to us through the eyes of Ishmael. In Melville's book, the "cerebral and reflective narrator" (Dowling 50) sees his life become so entangled in Queequeg's that, in the end, he is just saved by clinging to the only "lifebuoy" available after the Pequod sinks: the harpooner's coffin, "the very dreaded symbol of grim death" (Melville 396).

Onscreen, Ishmael is played by the American actor Henry Thomas. In the miniseries, the teleplay writers chose to make him a complete greenhorn in terms of seafaring and the blubber business. In the source text, Ishmael is an experienced sailor who has had "several voyages in the merchant service", but he knows very little about whaling when he decides to join the crew of the Pequod (Melville 71). And he is also a truth-seeker capable of reaching the heights of Platonic philosophy with deep considerations such as this: "methinks that in looking at things spiritual, we are too much like oysters observing the sun through the water, and thinking that thick water the thinnest of air" (Melville 45). In the 1998 version of *Moby Dick*, this meditative narrator is naiver and less erudite, but he "works well enough as a surrogate for the viewer, talking in a strange new world" (James 28). Thomas plays Ishmael with as much sense of awe and wonder as when he inhabited the role of Elliott in Steven Spielberg's 1982 *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*. The whole universe of whaling seems to exert on him the same fascination as the friendly alien did on that sensitive ten-year-old boy.

And there is some sort of childlike amazement in the way Thomas's Ishmael points his finger at the huge tail of the first whale he spots after it briefly surfaces from the depths of the blue ocean. He stands close to the bulwarks with his shipmate Queequeg and, with his mouth agape, contemplates "the many marvels of [the whale's] … majestic bulk and mystic ways" (Melville 105), as his literary counterpart puts it. When the Polynesian harpooner makes the whale symbol, right after letting Ishmael pick the ship, the miniseries seems to visually suggest a conjunction of opposites that transcends heaven and Earth.

Before discussing the final symbols associated with the great white whale, a detail worth mentioning at this point is that the whales we get to see through the eyes of Ishmael are far from being real. In the miniseries, the camera interpolates shots apparently retrieved from archive material of real-life whales and sequences using animatronics whale parts. These models provided by television art designers were used in scenes in which they had to show the animals bleeding or being pierced by harpoons or lances.

Unlike the 1956 version, in which actual footage of whales being hunted and killed by real harpoons was used (Hill 1), the 1998 miniseries was criticized for its "faux whale models" (Lavery 101,105; James 28). In fact, production employed fabricators to produce a 30-meter animatronics whale (McMurria 247). Because of the intense contemporary debate on whaling by environmental groups, and the complete ban on this activity in several countries, not only the display but also the mere suggestion of these animals being killed in a film or a book tends to raise a lot of eyebrows. Entire productions have been shut down because of whale conservation concerns regarding artistic presentations of some sort of "revenge toward the whale" (Dowling 62).

The debate was so heated that in a 1998 interview for *The Today Show* in Australia, Patrick Stewart, who plays captain Ahab, was asked the following question by Tracy Grimshaw:

"Whaling is so politically incorrect these days. Did you worry at all that, because of that, the movie mightn't strike… or the story mightn't strike the chord that it used to?" ("Patrick Stewart on The Today Show," 00:04:08–00:04:17). Stewart replied:

> I didn't worry about that… No, Tracy. We are telling a literary masterpiece and telling it as authentically as possible was the most important thing to do. However, what we did here in the United States when it had several months ago was that we linked those screenings as well as some of the premieres to a fundraiser for the Whale Conservation Institute in Massachusetts and, in fact, we did a lot of education-related work on the plight of whales today and on what can be done to help them. So, we hope we achieved some kind of rational balance in all of this ("Patrick Stewart on The Today Show," 00:04:18–00:04:57).

For this and other reasons, Roddam's miniseries was not able to use real whaling archive footage and had to rely solely on CGI (computer-generated imagery) technology and on models of artificial whale parts like humps, fins and tails built by the design department. As a matter of fact, until now none of the *Moby Dick* adaptations could present totally convincing visual solutions to the challenge of portraying the great Albino sperm whale and other portions of the plot concerning whaling. Moby Dick and the whales harpooned tend to look artificial both in rubber models and in CGI. Recreating the whales is such a difficult challenge that even the latest Moby Dick-related film, Ron Howard's 2015 *In the Heart of the Sea*,[3] shows somewhat fake whales despite the fact it is a super-production that employs state-of-the-art computer-generated imagery technologies. Melville's book incorporates a visual imagination so vividly that it is quite difficult to convincingly capture onscreen. Except for Trey Stoke's 2010 adaptation, which is a very low-budget B movie that shows a deliberately fake and exaggerated whale-monster, none of the other major adaptations (1926, 1956, 2011) and even the 2015 Moby Dick-related movie, for different reasons, seem to develop the novel's full potential in terms of the natural spectacle and the unique look of the Albino sperm whale.

The ending of the three-day chase after Moby Dick, as noted earlier, had to be altered in order to sound more environmental friendly and, as a result, it became more symbolic. A few instants before we can see Ishmael clinging to Queequeg's coffin converted into a sort of lifebuoy, an extreme long shot of the camera shows that "the ship goes to the bottom after being consumed in a fire, not sucked below, as it is in both the novel and the [1956's] Huston/Bradbury version, in the whirlpool of the white whale's wake" (Lavery 100). Lavery's words above echo certain commentators who criticized the fact that, in Roddam's version, the Pequod ultimately sinks due to a fire caused when Moby Dick collides with the wooden hull of the ship. Fire would be used again seventeen years later in the sinking of the whaling ship Essex in Howard's 2015 *In the Heart of the Sea*.

Whether this change in the 1998 TV movie was due to political correctness or not, the fact is that there has been "overwhelming evidence supplied by natural scientists and specialists in whale behavior confirming the sperm whale is docile by nature" (Dowling 61). Whenever accidents such as whales colliding with ships happened, the common explanation during Melville's time, according to the sources available to a reader in the mid-1800s, was that the cetacean had attacked the vessel. Studies confirm, however, that these animals do not possess that kind of vindictive agency and that "human injury and death in whaling often occurred *when whales fled* their captors" (Dowling 52, Emphasis added). As a creative artist, Melville may have "twisted" what was known in terms of natural sciences and marine biology to serve his fiction (King 314–318). In the miniseries, the whale is hurt and agitated after being chased for a long time and then it collides with the Pequod due to men's direct actions. As a result of the impact, casks full of harvested spermaceti explode. But in the TV production the whale apparently is not to blame for the disaster. The teleplay writers' intention might have been to

3 *In the Heart of the Sea* is not a *Moby Dick* adaptation. In fact, it is a recounting of the actual sinking of the New England whaling ship Essex by a giant whale in 1820. This terrible experience, which inspired Melville's novel, was narrated by one of its survivors, Thomas Nickerson, a cabin boy at the Essex. Howard's film shares similar themes and motifs with *Moby Dick*: a giant white whale, an authoritarian captain (George Pollard Jr., played by Benjamin Walker), a confrontational first mate (Owen Chase, enacted by Chris Hemsworth), and an abused cabin boy (Nickerson, played by Tom Holland). After drifting helplessly for months in stranded whaleboats, the seamen practice cannibalism (like Queequeg back in Kokovoko) to survive. The movie also features a young Herman Melville (Ben Whishaw) gathering inspiration from conversations with an older Nickerson (Brendan Gleeson) in order to write his 1851 classic.

imply nature's triumph by showing "the white whale streaking by" and visually emphasizing "the image of a victorious Moby Dick" (Cahir 26).

The image of the Pequod bursting into flames may invite us to think about Roddam's decision of prominently featuring such a conflagration in the end of the miniseries. Given the emblematic meaning of this sequence, it is worth making a further point on the symbolism in connection with fire. Martin suggests that a proper symbol emerges when its meaning is not suggested by the interplay between two images, but it resides in the image itself (123). In addition to their impressive visual manifestation, the flames introduced in the final episode of this miniseries suggest deeper implicit associations. Chevalier and Gheerbrant believe that "like the sun, because of its rays, fire, because of its flames, symbolizes the fructifying, purifying and illuminating action" (438, Translation mine).[4] As it seems to be the case for most symbols, fire often conflates positive with negative meanings: "fire is ultra-life. It embraces both good (vital heart) and bad (destruction and conflagration). It implies the desire to annihilate time and to bring all things to their end" (Cirlot 106).

Having seen most of the crewmembers tragically consumed by the flames, one might think that fire was deliberately introduced in the scene in order to suggest a purification of the terrible mistakes made by Ahab and his followers. After all, "fire is also, ... as it burns and consumes, a symbol of purification and regeneration" (438, Translation mine).[5] The curious combination of fire with water — two of the most fundamentally incompatible elements in nature — is also very indicative of the irreconcilable antagonism between Ahab and the nemesis he came to embody in the great white whale. Even though they are not immolated in the Pequod's fire, Ahab and the harpooners also experience a form of spiritual redemption by water.

After the fire and the shipwreck, Ahab's drowned body is shown in the blue depths of the sea. Now he looks very different than he did a few instants earlier: a hateful frowning man with a grave countenance transfixed with rage. An underwater close-up shot of his serene corpse-pale face and of his undulating hair being washed up in slow motion by the currents suggest that he has found peace of mind. Cahir goes as far as to note a certain "traditional iconography of the crucified Christ" (25) in the final images of the captain Stewart/Ahab. In purely symbolic terms, "the purification by fire is complementary of the purification by water" since "Fire, in the initiatory rites of death and rebirth, is associated with its antagonistic principle of Water" (436, Translation mine).[6]

Unlike the novel's ending, which narrates the shipwreck with terribly dark connotations such as "Satan ... would not sink to hell", "yawning gulf" and "the great shroud of the sea" (Melville 427), Roddam's miniseries seems to be attempting to shed some light on the whole tragedy. Although this is not even close to the happy ending of the 1926 adaptation *The Sea Beast*, one might say that the viewer is left with a little sense of positivity in the TV version. Patrick Stewart suggested that Ahab's final confrontation with Moby Dick in the book is "lacking in drama" since it ends too quickly, and then he went as far as to add that "Melville missed it" (Hill 1). His observation echoes the conclusions of some critics who argue that, after hundreds of pages, "the long-awaited encounter with Moby Dick" is a bit fast and (in some minds) frustrating because "Ahab is dispatched in one short sentence" (Buell 373), never to be seen again.

Roddam's miniseries, unlike the novel which finishes Ahab off so suddenly (Melville 426), emphasizes the image of his corpse underwater. The picture shows his dead body, already disentangled from the sperm whale, slowly turning and sinking to the sound of soft instrumental music. One might associate his corpse with the notion that death symbolically delivers him from "negative and regressive forces" (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 650, Translation mine).[7] All this symbolic display of Ahab's body take place while Moby Dick, in the background of the screen, seems to glide peacefully ahead into the blue sea. Roddam's changes like, for example, not placing the blame on the supposed wickedness of the whale, showing a dead peaceful-looking

4 "Comme le soleil par ses rayons, le feu par ses flammes symbolise l'action fécondante, purificatrice et illuminatrice" (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 438).

5 "Le feu est également, ... en tant qu'il brûle et consume, un symbole de purification et de régénérescence" (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 438).

6 "la purification par le feu est complémentaire de la purification par l'eau ... Le Feu, dans les rites initiatiques de mort et renaissance, s'associe à son principe antagoniste l'Eau" (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 436).

7 "des forces négatives et régressives" (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 650).

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Ahab underwater, and including an apparent purification ritual by fire seem to visually suggest some sort of dramatic redemption. Given that fire might be an "agent of transmutation … since all things derive from, and return to, fire" (Cirlot 105), the miniseries closes with a slight hint of hope.

V – CONCLUSION

The particular task I have set myself here was to conduct an investigation into the 1998 Franc Roddam's adaptation of *Moby Dick* in order to assess in more depth not only a few aspects of the production such as the acting performances, the historical accuracy, the teleplay, the direction, but also the symbols created by the audiovisual production. In my earlier discussions, I noted that sequences involving characters as diverse as Elijah, Ahab, Queequeg and the great white whale visually incorporated a number of symbols not necessarily included in Melville's novel. By now, I hope that I have provided some grounds to support the contention that the 1998 version introduces a series of symbolic elements and creatures that might suggest some of Melville's subjects concerning death, evil, the afterlife and the unknown.

As noted earlier, the sequence involving the ragged prophet Elijah includes a dog not originally present neither in the source text nor in the other audiovisual adaptations analyzed. Based on Martin's and Beaver's theoretical notions of cinematic symbols, I concluded that the image of this animal closely associated with Elijah serves a symbolic purpose. It appears to impregnate the scene with intimations of ill omen related to the dark premonition revealed by Elijah's prophecy. However, the need for symbolization felt unnecessary in the TV production since the teleplay writers put major spoiler details explicitly into the character's mouth.

I also explored the image of a promethean giant evoked by Ahab when he is having his ivory leg replaced by the carpenter of the Pequod. His allusion to this symbol attests to his delusions of grandeur, his everlasting rebellion and his profound sense of dissatisfaction that prompt him to conjure evil in order to overthrow the immense white nemesis that constantly belittles him.

Next, I discussed Queequeg's inscription of a "queer round figure" resembling a whale into captain Peleg's books. The typesetters who printed the first edition of *Moby Dick* in 1851 replaced the mark — expressly contained in Melville's manuscript (the so-called "queer round figure") — with a sort of Christian cross. In this case, the mark introduced by Queequeg in Roddam's miniseries follows more closely Melville's explicit instruction contained in the manuscript than the one inserted by nineteenth-century typesetters in the very first edition of the novel. As a harpooner who holds with his bare hands a whale's death by the tip of his weapon, Queequeg's whale-shaped "signature" in the TV production symbolizes his identification with the very beasts he preys on. In doing so, he incorporates the deep mystical meanings often associated with the whales (the treasure, the misfortune, the conjunction between heaven and Earth).

Then I moved on to consider the final image of the Pequod bursting into flames, which is a substantial alteration of Melville's apocalyptic ending to the adventure. Although the shipwreck does not involve fire in the source text, the teleplay writers of the 1998 version chose to sink the Pequod due to a conflagration following a collision with Moby Dick. The sequence seems to exonerate the whale and to indicate that the whole destruction was brought about by Ahab's titanic miscalculation and madness. I argue that the image of the fire was deliberately introduced to suggest a kind of purification ritual. As Cirlot points out, "as a mediator between forms which vanish and forms in creation, fire is, like water, a symbol of transformation and regeneration" (105).

Unlike the novel, which describes Ahab's sudden death and disappearance in a short sentence (Melville 426), the miniseries dedicates a longer time to his demise and then reveals his expression transitioning from fuming (while he is still alive) to serene when he is shown dead underwater. An image of the captain's corpse underwater is nonexistent in the source novel. In the telefilm, Ahab, the harpooners and a small part of the crew are not immolated in the Pequod's fire, but they appear to experience another kind of purification by water. The captain's death might symbolically intimate that he has finally left behind the negative forces which compelled him to violence.

On a final note, the miniseries *Moby Dick* was Melbourne's most expensive film project up to that date, having cost U$20 million (McMurria 247; James 28). This huge investment in a literary adaptation is consistent with the general-interest USA Network's attempt to bring

some prestige to such an international brand-sensitive cable/satellite channel (McMurria 238). Roddam's version "drew the highest basic-cable audience ever for any program other than news or sports, and the network's chief said she was especially pleased that it seems to have been a hit with families" (Mifflin 7). The anticipation generated by Roddam's telefilm only confirms the notion that an "adaptation is the art of democratization, a 'freeing' of a text from the confined territory of its author and of its readers" (Cartmell 8). The ratings confirm that the 1998 *Moby Dick* contributed to further democratize and popularize Melville's novel since it drew an average of "5.9 million households over the two nights, with an audience well balanced among adults, teenagers and children" (Mifflin 7).

In conclusion, it is important to point out that adaptations are invariably tricky procedures that are gradually coming to be more widely understood and appreciated (Leitch 9). However, there is still a long way to go before one stops regarding adaptations as a "spot the difference" puzzle in which one tries to find a number of "errors" between two otherwise similar cultural products. As Cléder and Jullier recently explained, it would be "more useful to try and understand what these modifications transform in terms of the *comprehension* that one might have of the initial work" (7, Translation mine).[8] And then they add that "it would be a lot more worthwhile if, instead of reading that a work A translates a work B, one could say that adaptation implies two works, A and B, which have a certain number of things in common, and they, in part, speak of the same things while reciprocally shedding light on each other" (Cléder and Jullier 18, Translation mine).[9] That being said, it seems clear enough that the 1998 *Moby Dick*, as a group effort constructed of collective interpretations of Melville's masterpiece, is "a high-water mark for all involved" (Roberts 484) since it prioritizes a relevant portion of the novel's plot and it also incorporates a number of very creative and thought-provoking symbolic elements. And as for further intricacies concerning the poetic and philosophical components of this literary fishery, they can be found in the source text. After all, that is what the novel is ultimately for.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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8 "Il serait plus utile d'essayer de comprendre ce que les modifications transforment dans la *compréhension* qu'on peut avoir de l'œuvre initiale" (Cléder and Jullier 7).

9 "Il vaudrait pourtant mieux, au lieu de lire qu'une œuvre B traduit une ouvre A, dire que l'adaptation implique deux œuvres A et B qui ont un certain nombre de choses en commun et parlent en partie des mêmes choses en s'éclairant réciproquement" (Cléder and Jullier 18).

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