

Possession in Nineteenth-Century American Novels of the Sea:
The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket and *Moby-Dick*

Yuko Takase

Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe published his only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* in 1838. (I use *Pym* in Italics for the title of the story to distinguish the title from the character, Pym). It was 13 years later, in 1851 that when Herman Melville published his masterpiece, *Moby-Dick*. Many scholars, including Richard Kopley, agree that *Pym* influenced *Moby-Dick* (XXVIII). Certainly, we can see common points between the two works. Both take place on whaling vessels of Nantucket and, in the novels, white appeared as a symbolic color. There is also the high possibility that Melville read Poe's *Pym*, which was published 13 years before *Moby-Dick*.

However, my concern is not with the whaling industry or the symbolic meaning of whiteness, but with the concept of possession depicted in both works. Both novels were published in 1838 and 1851 and, during this period, American continental expansion reached its zenith. The nineteenth century was the age of expansion in American history. Consequently, possession featuring in both works during this formative age of land acquisition is to be expected. Assuming that the political process of expansion affects writers or their literary works, there is a possibility that we can see writers' thoughts on imperialism. Rapid expansion saw the country's territory treble from her founding to the mid-nineteenth century. I will consider the construction of possession in literary works in this period and examine my assumption that the writers of the day were more or less affected by the expansion of America.

The expansionism of nineteenth-century America most commonly meant land acquisition, however, expansion also ranged over the ocean. "Alaska was purchased from Russia in with a convention signed March 30, 1867 and proclaimed June 20, 1867, and was made a Territory by act of August 24,

1912” (Van Zandt 29). Subsequently, to the Alaska Purchase, “the Republic of Hawaii was formally annexed to the United States by the voluntary action of its citizens and a joint resolution of Congress approved July 7, 1898. The transfer of sovereignty took place August 12, 1898. The area was constituted a Territory by act of April 30, 1900” (Van Zandt 33). During the nineteenth century, the expansion of America was directed toward the ocean. The whaling industry reached its peak number of vessels as well as whales killed in the mid-nineteenth-century ahead of the Alaska Purchase; therefore, the peak period of whaling coincides with the expansion of America. Consequently, I argue that nineteenth-century American Novels of the sea, especially those dealing with whaling, inscribed writers’ critical thoughts or attitudes on their expanding nation.

1. The Definition of Possession

Before examining both works, I plan to pursue the definition of land ownership and the process of possessing land with the help of the French political scientist, Alexis de Tocqueville. In 1835, Tocqueville published *Democracy in America*, which he wrote after his nine-month visit to America in 1831. Isaac Kramnick, an American historian, evaluated the influence of Tocqueville:

If the number of times an individual is cited by politicians, journalists, and scholars is a measure of their influence, Alexis de Tocqueville—not Jefferson, Madison, or Lincoln—is America’s public philosopher.
(ix)

As he showed, many presidents and politicians cited Tocqueville in their speeches and even today, “Tocqueville is everywhere in the United States, pervading its public discourse” (Kramnick ix). Tocqueville observed the prospering democratic system in America as a possible model for post-revolutionary France and also explored the possible dangers of democracy. Tocqueville considered America as “the only continent in which we have been able to watch the natural and peaceful development of a society and define the influence exerted by the origins upon the future of the states” (38). Moreover,

it was remarkable that he mentioned differences in land ownership between America and France.

He thought, in old France, the power that “ruled over the people” was “landed property”:

I turn my thought back for a moment to the France of seven hundred years ago [about nine hundred years ago from now] which I discover was split between a small number of families who owned the land and ruled over the people living there; the right of governing at that time moved down the generations along with the family inheritance; men had only one method of acting against each other and that was landed property. (12)

Tocqueville explained how European aristocracy “takes root in the land, attaches itself to the soil from which it derives its power; it is not established by privileges alone, it is not founded on birth but upon the ownership of property handed down through the generations” (40). In Europe, land was the foundation of the aristocracy, inherited through generations.

However, in America, the land “was inhabited by countless native tribes, it is justifiable to assert that, at the time of its discovery, it formed only a desert. The Indians took up residence there but did not possess it” (Tocqueville 36). Regarding land ownership, there was a substantial difference from its foundation between the two countries; although in European countries, land is a fundamental element forming the basis of an aristocracy, nobody possessed the land of America, in other words, America was no man’s land when European settlers landed on the shores of the New World. Tocqueville used the expression; “the empty cradle of a great nation” to describe the land of North America but, in fact, it was not empty (36). Although most of the land is a poor desert and literally empty, the rich soil of North America was occupied by Native Americans.

Then, if Native Americans would not have possessed the land, how could settlers have owned it, or how could we have defined that it was not owned by Native Americans? The process of the possession of the land, according to Tocqueville, was that “it is through agriculture that man takes ownership

over the soil and the first inhabitants of North America lived off the products of hunting” (36). Land ownership is attained by people who clear the land which “nothing short of the persistent and committed efforts of the owner himself was needed” (40). One of the most progressive social movements of the late-nineteenth century is the Homestead Act of 1862.¹ As Walter Benn Michaels remarks: “At the heart of the homestead movement was the conviction that the land should belong to those who worked it” (94). The land in America is for the people “who worked it”.

Having indicated the definition of land ownership in America, I plan to pursue their concept of possession. As we have considered, Native Americans occupied without possessing land in America; however, this did not bring about ownership because they were hunters and resided without cultivation. Nevertheless, this is a rule of settlers; Tocqueville’s view about the possession of land is the same as European settlers’. Here, we can see the contradiction of land acquisition of America. Although there were indigenous people of North America, how do we affirm that they do not take possession of it? If Native Americans would not have possessed the land of America, how would someone have taken possession of it? According to the Oxford English Dictionary [OED], the verb, “possess” means “to own, to have or gain ownership of; to have (wealth or material objects) as one’s own” possession. The noun “possession” is “the action or fact of holding something (material or immaterial) as one’s own or in one’s control; the state or condition of being so held.” The secondary meaning is defined as a legal term: “Law. Visible power or control over something (defined by the intention to use or to hold it against others) as distinct from lawful ownership; spec. exclusive control of land”, that is, “possession” is sometimes used as a legal term to claim the right to have an ownership “against others.” As mentioned previously, my purpose is not examining legal documents from America (though some may be used), but with researching *Pym* and *Moby-Dick* to find the signs of the concept of possession, especially of land in America. Therefore I return to my main theme in the next chapter.

2. Diverse Possession on the islands
in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*

The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket is set mainly at sea. In the beginning of the novel, Pym described his property and its worth: “I owned a sailboat called the *Ariel*, and worth about seventy-five dollars” (7). The novel begins with an accident that Arthur Gordon Pym and his friend, Augustus, suffered on Pym’s sailboat. Shipwrecked by stormy weather, then fortunately rescued by a large whaling ship, the *Penguin*, Pym lost his vessel, at the beginning of the novel. Her end was depicted as follows:

The *Ariel* was slightly put together, and in going down her frame naturally went to pieces; the deck of the cuddy, as might be expected, was lifted, by the force of the water rushing in, entirely from the main timbers, and floated (with other fragments, no doubt) to the surface—Augustus was buoyed up with it, and thus escaped a terrible death. (15)

Eventually, the fragment of his lost boat saved Pym and Augustus.

The novel deals with the loss of property, however, at the beginning of Chapter 1 of *Pym*, namely before the wreck of the *Ariel*, Pym shows an interest in property:

My maternal grandfather was an attorney in good practice. He was fortunate in everything, and had speculated very successfully in stocks of the Edgarton New-Bank, as it was formerly called. By these and other means he had managed to lay by a tolerable sum of money. He was more attached to myself, I believe, than to any other person in the world, and I expected to inherit the most of his property at his death. (7)

Pym believed that his maternal grandfather “was more attached” to him “than to any other person in the world.” Pym “expected to inherit most of his property at his death,” however, his situation suddenly changed. After the shipwreck, his desire to go to sea was not dampened:

It might be supposed that a catastrophe such as I have just related would have effectually cooled my incipient passion for the sea. On

the contrary, I never experienced a more ardent longing for the wild adventures incident to the life of a navigator than within a week after our miraculous deliverance. (18)

Augustus's father, Mr. Barnard was appointed commander of a whaling vessel, the *Grampus*, and Augustus planned to go with him. Pym intended to accompany Augustus to fulfill his desire to return to the sea. However, his grandfather becomes angry when he hears about Pym's plan to board a whaling ship.

...my grandfather, from whom I expected much, vowed to cut me off with a shilling if I should ever broach the subject to him again. These difficulties, however, so far from abating my desire, only added fuel to the flame. (19)

Pym's grandfather was angered at his intention to board a whaling ship, not only because it meant the abandonment of family but, also, the renunciation of remaining in Nantucket. To follow the definition of the possession of land in America, it is necessary to clear, settle, or cultivate to possess land, whereas Pym intended to travel far from the mainland. Thus, he abandoned the possibility of the cultivation of land in America.

His grandfather's opposition only stirred Pym's ambition further. Pym renounces his inheritance by going on a whaling voyage with his friend, Augustus. His behavior toward his inheritance suggests his manner toward possession. He did not insist on his right as his grandfather's heir, as he did not have a strong attachment to his inheritance. His renunciation of the right of his inheritance and his subsequent departure meant his escape from his family, freedom from the possession of property, and from remaining in Nantucket. However, Pym, who was far away from America, could not be released from the possession of property.

His travels would bring him to confront the notion of expansion. In the latter half of the novel, surviving a mutiny, butchery, famine, and cannibalism, Pym and Dirk Peters, who is "a half-breed Indian" on the *Grampus*, were the sole survivors (3). A British schooner rescued them: "the *Jane Guy*, of Liverpool, Captain Guy, bound on a sealing and trading voyage to the South Seas and

Pacific" (133). As Captain Guy intended to make his first stop at Kerguelen's Land, Pym accompanied him by way of some islands in the Antarctic Ocean.

On the islands Pym visited, he encountered various islanders and perceived how the possession of land brought imperial expansion. This the case of the islands of Tristan d'Acunha depicted in the novel.² The islands consist "of three circular islands ... discovered by the Portuguese, and ... visited afterward by the Dutch in 1643, and by the French in 1767" (144). "Owing to the ease with which these various animals were here formerly taken, the group [the islands] has been much visited since its discovery. The Dutch and French frequented it at a very early period" (145). In 1790, Captain Patten's party tried to remain a long time in the islands:

In 1790, Captain Patten, of the ship *Industry*, of Philadelphia, made Tristan d'Acunha, where he remained seven months (from August, 1790, to April, 1791) for the purpose of collecting sealskins. In this time he gathered no less than five thousand six hundred, and says that he would have had no difficulty in loading a large ship with oil in three weeks. (145)

Subsequently to Captain Patten's stay:

Captain Colquhoun, of the American brig *Betsey*, touched at the largest of the islands for the purpose of refreshment. He planted onions, potatoes, cabbages, and a great many other vegetables, an abundance of all which are now to be met with. (145-46)

Although Captain Colquhoun seemed to clear and cultivate the islands, sailors did not stay long in one place. However, some American had settled down on the islands for years:

In 1811, a Captain Heywood, in the *Nereus*, visited Tristan. He found there three Americans, who were residing upon the island to prepare sealskins and oil. One of these men was named Jonathan Lambert, and he called himself the sovereign of the country. He had cleared and cultivated about sixty acres of land, and turned his attention to raising the coffee plant and sugar cane, with which he had been furnished by the American Minister at Rio Janeiro. (146)

Here, we can see the typical process of possession in America that Tocqueville indicated in his book—to clear and cultivate. However, this is not the only process of possession we can recognize on Tristan d’Acunha: “This settlement, however, was finally abandoned, and in 1817 the islands were taken possession of by the British government, who sent a detachment for that purpose from the Cape of Good Hope” (146). In this case, the British Government were temporarily deprived of the possession of the islands, they “did not retain them long; but, upon the evacuation of the country as a British possession, two or three English families took up their residence there independently of the government” (146). At that time, although the British Government evacuated Tristan d’Acunha, English families still resided on the islands independently. Although the British government’s legal possession of the islands was not recognized at the time, English families continued their occupancy. As a result, the community increased. In 1824, Captain Jeffrey from London arrived at the islands and met an Englishman, named Glass:

He [Glass] claimed to be supreme governor of the islands, and had under his control twenty-one men and three women....The population occupied themselves chiefly in collecting sealskins and sea elephant oil, with which they traded to the Cape of Good Hope, Glass owning a small schooner. At the period of our arrival the governor was still a resident, but his little community had multiplied, there being fifty-six persons upon Tristan, besides a smaller settlement of seven on Nightingale Island. (146)

It seemed that Glass was a member of the English families who continued occupancy on the island. When Pym and others arrived at the island, the population of this community had increased nearly two-fold. In *Pym*, we can see various uses of land in the islands: residence, clear and cultivate, and occupy. The circumstances that developed on Tristan d’Acunha agreed with the diverse processes of imperial expansion.

Beginning with the loss of Pym’s possession (the *Ariel*), and his decision to renounce his inheritance and embark on an adventurous journey on unknown seas, Pym observed the possession of land at the islands in the

Antarctic Ocean. The example of Glass, who created a community and settled land to increase its population, recalls Manifest Destiny. In 1845, a journalist named John O'Sullivan who used the term "manifest destiny" to promote expansionism in America wrote two articles: "Annexation" in the *Democratic Review*, and "The True Title" in *New York Morning News*. In "Annexation," he wrote:

Why, were other reasoning wanting, in favor of now elevating this question of the reception of Texas into the Union, out of the lower region of our past party dissension, up to its proper level of a high and broad nationality, it surely is to be found, found abundantly, in the manner in which other nations have undertaken to intrude themselves into it, between us an the proper parties to the case, in a spirit of hostile interference against us, for the avowed object of thwarting our policy and hampering our power, limiting our greatness and checking the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.³

O'Sullivan demonstrated that the population went on increasing year after year in support of his statement, spreading over the continent. Thus, population growth was essential to national expansion as to house the population, new land in the continent was required.

The 1830s in America, in which Poe had written *Pym*, saw many Indian Wars, the Indian Removal Act in 1830, the Black Hawk War in 1832, and the First and Second Seminole Wars. The Monroe Doctrine was declared in 1823. Pym/Poe witnessed a kind of simultaneous process happening in Tristan d'Acunha and America—by increasing the settled population, land expanded.

3. The Possession of Whales in *Moby-Dick*

Ishmael, who is the narrator of *Moby-Dick*, is an orphan, unlike Pym, therefore, he is never worried about or expecting an inheritance or property. However, *Moby-Dick* is about whaling, and the possession of whales is the main motivation of the whaling industry. Possession is not a remote subject

from this novel. If we consider only the outline of this novel, the main plot concerns the chase and harpooning of a whale.

Herman Melville mainly wrote about “possession” in Chapter 87, The Grand Armada; Chapter 89, Fast Fish and Loose Fish; and Chapter 90, Heads or Tails. The subjects that developed in these chapters seem to concern the possession of whales by first sight; however, these chapters not only concern whales, but also, countries, the law of possession, and what the possession is. For example, in Chapter 87, it was explained that:

The waif is a pennoned pole, two or three of which are carried by every boat; and which, when additional game is at hand, are inserted upright into the floating body of a dead whale, both to mark its place on the sea, and also as token of prior possession, should the boats of any other ship draw near. (305)

“The waif” is a kind of flag with a pole that declares the possession of a whale. Planting a flag claimed a prior right of possession. Concerning the waifs, Melville explained “some account of the laws and regulations of the whale fishery” in the following Chapter 89, Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish (307). There are the two whaling laws concerning the possession of whales: “I. A Fast-Fish belongs to the party fast to it. II. A Loose-Fish is fair game for anybody who can soonest catch it” (308). A Fast-Fish is defined as:

Alive or dead a fish is technically fast, when it is connected with an occupied ship or boat, by any medium at all controllable by the occupant or occupants,—a mast, an oar, a nine-inch cable, a telegraph wire, or a strand of cobweb, it is all the same. Likewise a fish is technically fast when it bears a waif, or any other recognised symbol of possession; so long as the party wailing it plainly evince their ability at any time to take it alongside, as well as their intention so to do. (308)

Furthermore, Melville said, “these two laws touching Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish...will on reflection, be found the fundamentals of all human jurisprudence” (309).

As highlighted by Arimichi Makino, Melville exemplifies how the law can “be pretty generally applicable” in this chapter (my trans.; 63). According to Ishmael, a whale is referred to as a “loose-fish,” when the body has become completely detached from the whaling vessel and is no longer “fast,” or fastened to any property (harpoons, rope, and the like). In contrast, the term “fast-fish” refers to a whale that remains “fast” to the property of those who have fastened it. Furthermore, in Chapter 90, ownership of a “fast-fish” is, according to British law, determined as follows: “Of all whales captured by anybody on the coast of that land, the King, as Honorary Grand Harpooneer, must have the head, and the Queen be respectfully presented with the tail” (310). This legal interpretation of whale ownership highlights, to borrow Makino’s words, “ineffectiveness and unethical practice” (my trans.; 63). Makino has expanded on Melville’s ownership discussion as follows:

Even in the United States, with its noble philosophies such as the Declaration of Independence that purport to assert the freedom and equality of people, once issues of ownership become involved, involving ownership of ‘moveable property’ such as slaves as well as trafficking in land titles after massacres of Indians and wage slavery, and these matters are justified under legal interpretations of those in power, the reality becomes one of ‘lawlessness’ (my trans.; 64).

The ambiguity of the law concerning the ownership of whales overlaps with the ambiguity of laws surrounding the possession of land in America. Melville’s contemplation about the laws of possession touched the concept of possession itself: “Possession is half of the law: that is, regardless of how the thing came into possession? But, often possession is the whole of the law. What are the sinews and souls of Russian serfs and Republican slaves but Fast-Fish, whereof possession is the whole of the law” (309)?

Melville found that the essence of the law of possession “regardless of how the thing came into possession,” meant that the man who had killed the whale could not have possession of it. There was no direct relation between the harpooner and the possessor; and “whereof possession is the whole of the law” means that a possessor determines the law of possession. In other words, only

the owners can decide how to possess things they want and, consequently, those who were possessed like Russian serfs and Republican slaves who did not have any choice or power to choose—they belonged to the possessor who was the law itself.⁴ Melville enumerated the Fast-Fish that spread everywhere, and it is noteworthy that Ireland (for England), and Texas (for the United States) are including in his Fast-Fish list. It was obvious that Melville was referring to the Texas Annexation in 1845. In fact, he wrote on the expansion of his own country while illustrating the law of the whale.

Moreover, Melville claimed that the doctrine of Loose-Fish was more versatile and applicable than that of the Fast-Fish:

What was America in 1492 but a Loose-Fish, in which Columbus struck the Spanish standard by way of waiving it for his royal master and mistress? What was Poland to the Czar? What Greece to the Turk? What India to England? What at last will Mexico be to the United States? All Loose-Fish. (310)

Melville suggested here that, until 1492, America was a Loose-Fish. According to Melville, the Native Americans hunted in the forests and meadows of America and lived in many areas, but they did not claim that any land belonged to them. Many Native American tribes had no concept of land ownership. Mother Earth was considered a spirit and formed part of the bounty given to all by the Great Spirit. Nobody possesses America; it did not belong to groups or individuals.

Until 1492, the land that became the United States was neither a “fast-fish” nor a “loose-fish” but was rather, “just a fish.” It was “discovered” by pilgrims and settlers, who later came to regard the whole continent as a “loose-fish.” In this paragraph, Melville covered about 350 years between 1492 and 1851; America was a Loose-Fish in 1492; however, he indicated the possibility that Mexico will be Loose-Fish for the United States in the last sentence. Here, we can see the dynamic conversion of America/the United States from the subject to the object. In 1492, “America” was just a signifier that suggested an enigmatic shore; it was a desirable New World for European settlers as Melville wrote: “Columbus struck the Spanish standard [flag] by way of waiving it for

his royal master and mistress" (310). "Waifing," in other words, "striking a flag," asserts the right of prior possession. Therefore, Melville indicated the discovery of the New World by Columbus using a metaphorical expression of the waifing of a whale: America in 1492 was the whale and, also, a Loose-Fish.

However, as Melville suggested, "what at last will Mexico be to the United States?" In 1851, or the days in which Melville was working on his novel, the United States was no longer a Loose-Fish, but Mexico was (310). His reference here undoubtedly indicated the Mexican-American War (1846-1848).⁵ Melville was certainly conscious of the social and political background; the progressive expansion of territory as "Manifest Destiny" was pursued while he wrote *Moby-Dick*. In Chapter 14, Nantucket, Melville also made mention of Mexico:

Let America add Mexico to Texas, and pile Cuba upon Canada; let the English overswarm all India, and hang out their blazing banner from the sun; two thirds of this terraqueous globe are the Nantucketer's. For the sea is his; he owns it, as Emperors own empires; other seamen having but a right of way through it. (65)

In this chapter, Melville began to write with "the wondrous traditional story of how this island [Nantucket] was settled by the red-men [Native Americans]" (65). He continued that, although America may add Mexico, Cuba, and Canada to American territory, the Nantucketer's own the sea, which covers two-thirds of the globe. He not only implied the Mexican-American War but, also, the imperialistic movement of America in the middle of the nineteenth century. In Melville's description, which clearly stated that the Nantucketer's owned the sea, there was a touch of cynicism about excessive American expansionism.

America, which used to be an object of desire for European settlers (as with Loose-Fish), regarded Mexico as a Loose-Fish which "anybody who can soonest catch it" may do so (308). The signifier, America, also transfigured into the substantial country that signified in the plural forms "the United States."

Conclusion

Rereading both novels of the sea, in the context of "possession," *The*

Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket and *Moby-Dick*, we can see the essence of possession as Tocqueville defined it, the vicissitudes of the possessor of the unexplored island in *Pym*, and the ambiguity of possession in *Moby-Dick*. However, there was a sense of expansionism, which was rapidly growing in the United States, hidden in the background and context of these novels.

After Pym was released from the possession of property, he observed the various systems of the possession of land. I want to add a further event that happened to Pym, that is, he cleared the ground himself and built structures in the island where he alighted. The crew of the *Jane Guy*, which rescued Pym and Dirk Peters, landed on an island where so-called “savages” lived and began trading with them:

A bargain was accordingly struck, perfectly satisfactory to both parties, by which it was arranged that, after making the necessary preparations, such as laying off the proper grounds, erecting a portion of the buildings, and doing some other work in which the whole of our crew would be required, the schooner should proceed on her route, leaving three of her men on the island to superintend the fulfillment of the project, and instruct the natives in drying the *biche de mer*.⁶ (177)

The buildings here were not houses for living in, but stores to preserve dried goods for trade. It seemed that natives reluctantly provided the grounds of the island, which they possessed, for a bargain. This bargain looked “perfectly satisfactory to both parties,” however, considering subsequent events; it was unsatisfactory for the natives. The crew of the *Jane Guy*, including Pym, intended to clear the ground and build houses:

...we proceeded immediately to land everything necessary for preparing the buildings and clearing the ground. A large flat space near the eastern shore of the bay was selected, where there was plenty both of wood and water, and within a convenient distance of the principal reefs on which the *biche de mer* was to be procured. We now all set to work in good earnest...[we] had felled a sufficient

number of trees for our purpose, getting them quickly in order for the framework of the houses... (179)

Pym, who longed for adventure, left his hometown and refused to settle down in Nantucket, then, like the settlers of America, cleared and cultivated land. In summary, he worked for land as Tocqueville or Michaels indicated. This episode stands as a sarcastic conversion of Pym from adventurer to settler. In the immediate aftermath of building the houses on the island, natives, who intentionally generated a landslide, buried the crew alive. Pym criticized the natives who “appeared to be the most wicked, hypocritical, vindictive, bloodthirsty, and altogether fiendish race of men upon the face of the globe” (210). However, the crew of the *Jane Guy* had induced the natives to execute their “vindictive” act.⁷ It seemed that the natives brought on this landslide in retaliation for the seizure of their land. Here, we can see that the positions of the natives as assailants and the crews as victims are reversed. In the island of the novel, it is perplexing to distinguish between assailant and victim, ally and enemy, and invader and trading partner. Poe depicted an indefinable boundary between the subject and object and the haves and the have-nots in the chaotic space of the island. Thus, the ambiguity of possession itself loomed; moreover, the rightfulness of expansion wavered.

On the other hand, in *Moby-Dick*, the object / Loose-Fish / America was transforming into the subject / harpooner / the United States, who was aiming at Loose-Fish. Melville wrote critically about the possession of the whale; actually, he talked about disputes over territory between countries in his novel. What happened to this transformation from the subject to the object? It was the achievement of independence from Great Britain. In the Declaration of Independence, there is an enumeration of usurpations that America submitted to prove the tyranny of Great Britain. One of them denounced the laws about obstructions to migration and land appropriation:

He [King] has endeavoured to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.⁸

The growth in population was a good reason for acquiring lands however, as under the British colonization of America, both the population and the land were oppressed. It seemed that the metamorphosis of Loose-Fish / the object, into the harpooner / the subject was the result of freedom from oppression by Great Britain. Melville represented this transformation by choosing words for his country in the same paragraph: "What was America in 1492 but a Loose-Fish" and "What at last will Mexico be to the United States?" (310). In 1492, America as a Loose-Fish was just a signifier of some obscure if substantial shore. However, after independence was gained from Great Britain, America changed into the United States, and the states were united to build a nation. Moreover, the new nation began growing to expand its territory.

In *Common Sense*, which greatly influenced the American independence, Thomas Paine harshly criticizes the evils of monarchy and hereditary succession:

To the evil of monarchy we have added that of hereditary succession; and as the first is a degradation and lessening of ourselves, so the second, claimed as a matter of right, is an insult and an imposition on posterity. For all men being originally equals, no one by birth could have a right to set up his own family in perpetual preference to all others for ever, and though himself might deserve some decent degree of honors of his cotemporaries, yet his descendants might be far too unworthy to inherit them (sic). (12)

At the root of Paine's accusation is the idea of equality; "MANKIND being originally equals in the order of creation, the equality could only be destroyed by some subsequent circumstance" (8). This is exactly the fundamental principle of the United States of America and the basis on which the Declaration of Independence begins. The monarchy and hereditary succession are a pestilence to the realization of the original equality.

Pym rejected inheritance, namely, hereditary succession; he cleared the land and built the houses on the island he visited by accident. As a result, his life was in peril. This aspect of Pym overlaps with America, which became independent of England and progressed on a new path of territorial expansion.

The United States of America, no longer Loose-Fish, went through the Revolutionary War; in other words, it refused the monarchy, severed its succession from the paternal power of Great Britain, and then chased Loose-Fish like a whaling ship. Melville obviously looked at this transformation of America with critical eyes as mentioned above.

Taken together, both Poe and Melville reflected the ambiguity of possession and the obscure definition of possession in their sea novels. Embedded in the story about the barbarous islands of *Pym* and the episode about the possession of whales in *Moby-Dick* are the historical revolution of America, independence from Great Britain, and the territorial acquisition that was currently in progress. Moreover, both of them—the founding principles and the expansionism—should not be told in the past tense; they are the national ethos of the United States of America as Poe and Melville had penetrated from the sea and had engraved on their manuscript.

Notes

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¹ For the detail of The Homestead Act, see National Archives. <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/homestead-act>

² As Richard Kopley argued, Poe is indebted for many geographical and historical elements of description of the islands to Benjamin Morrel's *A Narrative of Four Voyages*. (See Explanatory Notes by Richard Kopley in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* pp. 234.)

³ John O'Sullivan, Annexation (1845) [*United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 17, no. 1 (July-August 1845): 5-10.] See, <https://pdcrondas.webs.ull.es/anglo/OSullivanAnnexation.pdf>

⁴ The absurdity of the law is emphasized in Chapter 90, Heads or Tails. Melville illustrated the case where one gentleman deprived some poor, honest mariners of the fat of the whale, in the name of the Lord Warden, the Duke.

⁵ The Mexican-American War (1846-1848) marked the first U.S. armed

conflict chiefly fought on foreign soil. It pitted a politically divided and militarily unprepared Mexico against the expansionist-minded administration of U.S. President James K. Polk, who believed the U.S. had a “manifest destiny” to spread across the continent to the Pacific Ocean. See, HISTORY.com, <https://www.history.com/topics/mexican-american-war>

⁶ According to Kopley, “Poe is relying on Morrell’s discussion of biche-de-mer, the sea cucumber” (Explanatory Notes 238). Poe wrote; “It is that mollusca from the Indian Seas which is known in commerce by the French name *bouche de mer* (a nice morsel from the sea) (177). Also, Poe explained that the Chinese consider *biche de mer* a very great luxury, believing that it wonderfully strengthens and nourishes the system, and renews the exhausted system of the immoderate voluptuary (179).

⁷ According to OED, “vindictive” means “Of persons: Given to revenge; having a revengeful disposition” and “Of actions, qualities, etc.: Characterized by a desire for, or the exercise of, revenge”.

⁸ The Declaration of Independence, see USHistory.org, <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/>

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