

**Stony Brook University  
The Graduate School**

Doctoral Defense Announcement

**Abstract**

Herman Melville's Work Trilogy: Navigating the New Economic Waters of Antebellum  
America

By

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This dissertation examines the world of work as a predominant theme in the fiction of Herman Melville. The main texts under consideration, novels written in quick succession from 1849 to 1851, are Redburn: His First Voyage: Being the Sailor-boy Confessions and Reminiscences of the Son-of-a-Gentleman, in the Merchant Service; White Jacket or The World in a Man-of-War; and Moby-Dick or The Whale. Melville famously disparaged Redburn and White-Jacket as books he had "done for money," and critics have generally taken him at his word, ranking them low in the canon. This dissertation posits, in contrast, that Melville's serious intellectual engagement with the world of work is a strong thematic thread between them and Moby-Dick. The work issues Melville introduces in Redburn are expanded upon in White-Jacket, and receive their fullest and most profound consideration in Moby-Dick. This study proposes a new paradigm, arguing that the three novels represent a nautical work trilogy, a progression that presents increasingly deeper and more comprehensive treatments of the work theme and more dramatic statements of Melville's concerns for an industrializing antebellum America. Through the narrative voices and the experiences of his young protagonists, Melville portrays the growing difficulty of making the transition from boyhood to manhood in the changing working world of his day. In the broadest sense, Ishmael's story might serve as the third installment of a serialized saga featuring a representative young man, against ever-increasing perils, trying to earn his way in nineteenth-century America. In an era that produced advice manuals optimistically promising that ambition and industry would inevitably be rewarded with success, Melville countered with a picture of the grim realities of the changing workplace. The author was situated squarely in his historical time and culture, and with experience enhanced by insight Melville offered a unique contribution to the philosophical discourse concerning the nature and the value of work in antebellum America.

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