character trait. Moreover, in Dominick LaCapra’s terms, Ahab’s trauma is not structural or existential, but historical (i.e. it “is related to specific events”; *History and Memory after Auschwitz* 47).

Interestingly, in *Moby-Dick* Ahab feels drawn to others who have suffered from similarly traumatic experiences. For instance, when the Pequod meets a whaling ship from London, Ahab learns that its commander, Captain Boomer, has lost an arm because of Moby Dick. Ahab immediately wants to meet his fellow sufferer, and he greets Captain Boomer in an uncharacteristically sociable manner: “Aye, aye, hearty!” (336–337; ch. 100). Similarly, Ahab responds keenly to the fate of Pip, the black ship’s boy who, on two occasions in the novel, becomes so frightened during the chase of a whale that he jumps overboard. While the first time the others immediately abandon the chase to pick Pip out of the water, the second time they simply leave him behind. Although the sailors rescue Pip once the chase is completed, from that traumatic moment “the little negro went about the deck an idiot” (321; ch. 93). Significantly, when Ahab becomes aware of Pip’s altered condition, his reaction betrays intense emotions:

> Lo! ye believers in gods all goodness, and in man all ill, lo you! see the omniscient gods oblivious of suffering man; and, though idiotic, and knowing not what he does, yet full of the sweet things of love and gratitude. Come! I feel prouder leading thee by thy black hand, than though I grasped an Emperor’s! (392; ch. 125)

Ahab, usually so “inaccessible,” suddenly feels that community of suffering which, according to Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, often arises between people with shared experiences – especially if these experiences are of an “extraordinary if not traumatic quality” (47).

Of Masters and Slaves: Power, Isolation, and Recognition

What makes Ahab’s affection for young Pip particularly notable is that the latter is depicted as the very lowest person on board the ship (Fanning 217). For instance, the narrator points out that, “if there happen to be an unduly slender, clumsy, or timorous wight in the ship, that wight is certain to be made a ship-keeper” (319; ch. 93). Moreover, when Pip jumps overboard for the first time, the second mate Stubb upbraids him for being a coward and explicitly warns him that he may not be picked up so quickly next time: “[A] whale would sell for thirty times what you would, Pip, in Alabama” (321). Stubb, in other words, brutally reminds Pip of his status as a potential slave – a powerful threat in antebellum America, where slavery remained a terribly real threat for someone like Pip.
Given Pip’s position as the ship’s ‘symbolical slave,’ it is productive to read the relationship between Ahab and Pip in the light of Hegel’s account of the master-slave dialectic. In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel examines “how simple sensuous certainty mutates into a series of more advanced shapes of consciousness and, finally, into absolute knowing or speculative philosophy” (Houlgate 67). The analysis of the master-slave dialectic constitutes a crucial step in Hegel’s argument, for it is intended to demonstrate that no self-conscious being can ever exist as an entirely self-sufficient entity. When two consciousnesses fight for recognition, one initially becomes the dominant “master” or “lord” (*Herr*), while the other assumes the subservient position of “slave” or “bondsman” (*Knecht*). The master and the slave are, for Hegel, “two opposed shapes of consciousness; one is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another” (115). However, since for Hegel self-consciousness can only exist if it is recognized by another consciousness (112–114), the master also depends on the slave. This in turn renders the relationship between master and slave inherently unstable, for if the former depends on the latter, he cannot be seen as the unconditional master. Full self-consciousness is, then, only possible if recognition occurs between equals: when the master-slave dialectic is overcome or, to use Hegel’s term, sublated (*aufgehoben*) in a higher unity (Findlay xvii; Houlgate 68).

If we read the relationship between Ahab and Pip in the light of this master-slave dialectic, it becomes significant that Ahab explicitly bemoans his inescapable dependence on others. Ahab, the supreme master of the Pequod, curses “that mortal inter-indebtedness” that makes it impossible for him to “be free as air” (360; ch. 108) – or, we might add, to be truly self-reliant. Fittingly, when Ahab inspects the images on a Spanish doubloon that he has nailed to the Pequod’s main mast as a prize for whoever first sights Moby Dick, he reveals himself as the consummate narcissist:

[L]ook here, – three peaks as proud as Lucifer. The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too,
is Ahab; all are Ahab; and this round gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician’s glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self. (332; ch. 99)

At this point in the novel, Ahab construes the entire world as merely a reflection of himself – which of course renders true recognition of another impossible. It is in the very next chapter, however, that Ahab meets Captain Boomer, and this meeting with a fellow sufferer is the first moment a chink appears in Ahab’s armor of solipsism. Ahab’s empathy for Pip is the next step in this process, and, crucially, one of the first things Ahab notices when he looks at Pip is the latter’s inability to serve as his mirror: “I see not my reflection in the vacant pupils of thy eyes” (392; ch. 125). Whereas the pictures on the doubloon reflected only Ahab’s image of himself, the eyes of the symbolical slave seem to mirror nothing at all. Thus recognizing Pip as a fellow homeless soul, Ahab immediately decides that his own cabin “shall be Pip’s home henceforth” (392; ch. 125). In this way, the community of suffering between Ahab and Pip literally becomes the basis for a new and common home: a home made out of homelessness (as in Ishmael’s rhetorical attempts to universalize his sense of unbelonging).

At the same time, Ahab realizes that he can only continue his (self-)destructive quest to kill Moby Dick if he does not truly allow himself to accept others as equal human beings who, as such, are constitutive of his own, supposedly sovereign self. When Ahab finds that Pip’s condition is “too curing” for his malady because “[l]ike cures like,” he decides that they ought no longer to spend time together, and he hastily retreats when Pip tells him that he would prefer to “remain a part” of Ahab (399; ch. 129). Ahab is quite explicit about why he can no longer face Pip’s presence: “If thou speakest thus to me much more, Ahab’s purpose keels up in him” (399; ch. 129). He cannot, in other words, carry on with his single-minded quest if he acknowledges Pip the slave as constitutive of his own masterly self. Indeed, the very language Ahab uses expresses his inner conflict, for he distinguishes between the “me” that Pip addresses (“thou speakest thus to me”), and “Ahab,” another self, to which he refers in the third person only (“Ahab’s purpose keels up in him”).

Though Pip ultimately obeys Ahab’s command to leave him alone, the Pequod’s captain never quite regains his earlier ability easily to deny other humans the recognition they demand. For instance, not much after his final exchange with Pip, Ahab looks into Starbuck’s eyes and discovers the image of “the far

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26 cf. Edwin F. Edinger on Ahab’s reaction to Pip: “This is the first of several incidents indicating a growing self-awareness in Ahab, which begins to humanize him even if it is not sufficient to avert his tragic end” (109).
away home” there: the memory of his wife and child (406; ch. 132). Starbuck reacts by emphasizing that he, too, is a husband and father, before urging Ahab to abandon his quest for Moby Dick and, instead, to return to his loved ones. However, Ahab evades the presence of this too familiar Other – we learn that now his “glance was averted” – and instead muses upon the mysterious force that drives him onward:

What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozzening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time […]? Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm? But if the great sun move not of himself; but is as an errand-boy in heaven; nor one single star can revolve, but by some invisible power; how then can this one small heart beat; this one small brain think thoughts; unless God does that beating, does that thinking, does that living, and not I. (406–407; ch. 132)

Freud would, presumably, point out here that no ego is ever “master in its own house” because of the all-pervasive influence of the unconscious (Introductory Lectures 285). Ahab, by contrast, insists that an external force – a malevolent, “hidden lord and master” – must be the cause of his self-alienation. And yet, the crucial point is that Ahab has doubts about his own mastery at all. Far from “defyingly” worshipping the hidden master, as he did not so long ago (382–383; ch. 119), Ahab now seems weary and on the verge of resignation. As readers, we may thus speculate that, had Ahab been given more time to converse with others and truly to reflect on his own situation, he might eventually have overcome his narcissistic isolation and decided to turn homewards instead.

What supports this interpretation is that, in Moby-Dick, isolation from others is not only portrayed as a symptom, but also a cause of mental alienation. For instance, in the case of Pip, it is quite clear that the boy’s madness relates to his experience of absolute isolation after he had jumped overboard a second time, for “the awful lonesomeness” of the open ocean is intolerable to humans: “The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God! who can tell it?” (321; ch. 93). In properly Hegelian fashion, Pip’s self cannot survive without the presence of another; bereft of the presence of fellow human beings, the abandoned boy eventually becomes mad. I therefore agree with Sa-
muel Kimball that, in *Moby-Dick*, “selfhood is defined relationally in terms of homelessness,” in the sense that the self is haunted by the specter of abandonment and non-relation (546). Ahab, too, feels the intensity of this pressure, as he confesses to Starbuck after his last farewell to Pip:

> When I think of this life I have led; the desolation of solitude it has been; the masoned, walled-town of a Captain’s exclusiveness, which admits but small entrance to any sympathy from the green country without – oh, weariness! heaviness! Guinea-coast slavery of solitary command! – when I think of all this; only half-suspected, not so keenly known to me before – and how for forty years I have fed upon dry salted fare – fit emblem of the dry nourishment of my soul! [...] – away, whole oceans away, from that young girl-wife I wedded past fifty, and sailed for Cape Horn the next day, leaving but one dent in my marriage pillow – wife? wife? – rather a widow with her husband alive! (405; ch. 132)

Ahab believes that he suffers from more than the common sailor’s homesickness, though his absence from the loved ones at home is a burden, too. What makes his lot particularly difficult to endure is the “Captain’s exclusiveness” – that “Guinea-coast slavery of solitary command” that has for so long isolated him from his crew, the only home available during the years he spent far from his native Nantucket. Once again mastery involves a kind of “slavery” – an insight that for many years Ahab had “only half-suspected.”

The case of Ahab thus supports Terry Eagleton’s claim that power is “naturally solipsistic”: that it “tends to breed fantasy, reducing the self to a state of querulous narcissism” (*After Theory* 132). While the poor and disempowered cannot, according to Eagleton, afford to believe in a world that will simply bend to their every whim and desire, those in power regularly witness the apparent triumph of their own will over matter. Eagleton’s position is thus not entirely unlike Nietzsche’s, who posits a fundamental difference between “noble” and lower souls:

> In all kinds of injury and loss the lower and coarser soul is better off than the nobler soul: the dangers of the latter must be greater, the probability that it will come to grief and perish is in fact immense, considering the multiplicity of the conditions of its existence (*Beyond Good and Evil* 221; § 276)\(^\text{28}\)

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\(^{28}\) “Bei aller Art von Verletzung und Verlust ist die niedere und gröbere Seele besser daran als die vornehmere: die Gefahren der letzteren müssen grösser sein, ihre Wahrscheinlichkeit, dass sie verunglückt und zu Grunde geht, ist sogar, bei der Vielfachheit ihrer Lebensbedingungen, ungeheuer” (*Jenseits von Gut und Böse* 261–262; § 276).
Eagleton and Nietzsche thus share a sense that the elevated are also more vulnerable, for if their self is more sophisticated (or more inflated, depending on one’s point of view), it is also more likely to collapse entirely when confronted with an insurmountable obstacle. What is so poignant in Ahab’s case, however, is that his progress towards a less inflated sense of self is brutally cut short in *Moby-Dick*. When Ahab examines the images on the Spanish doubloon, he is still lost in the solipsism of his power. However, he increasingly opens up to others due to his encounters with fellow sufferers: Captain Boomer and little Pip. Ahab is a tragic figure because, when the Pequod meets Moby Dick and thus its doom, he is so close to overcoming his thirst for vengeance, to abandoning his monomaniac quest, and to re-establishing a sense of belonging with the fellow human beings around him.

*Moby-Dick* is, then, not primarily an indictment of Ahab as a character, but a critique of the very idea that self-reliant *Übermenschen* ought to shape the fate of the world. Even Nietzsche himself in fact admits that this idea involves terrible risks: “[T]he necessity for such leaders, the dreadful danger that they might be lacking, or miscarry and degenerate: – these are our real anxieties and glooms, ye know it well, ye free spirits!” (*Beyond Good and Evil* 117; § 203; original emphasis). For Emerson, failure also constitutes a possible outcome, yet he tends to portray it as an individual tragedy rather than as a threat to the fate of mankind as such (“The Transcendentalist” 252–253). In *Moby-Dick*, however, Ahab’s tragedy is not individual, as virtually all his followers meet their doom – even Queequeg, who is arguably the most positive and heroic character in the novel (e.g. Cohen, *The Novel and the Sea* 185; Edinger 35; Flory 96–97). Only Ishmael survives to tell the tale, lost and abandoned: “another orphan” (427; “Epilogue”). If a self-reliant individual as damaged as Ahab for one reason or another assumes the position of supreme commander, this will likely lead to death and destruction. Accordingly, we can read *Moby-Dick* as a political allegory against the evils of power and the threat inherent in the idea of self-reliant mastery.

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29 In his Jungian reading of Melville’s novel, Edwin F. Edinger describes a notably similar dynamic: “[I]nflation is also an alienation insofar as being at a height separates one both from others and from the earthly realities of one’s own being. A fall is necessary, but if it is too abrupt, or if the dissociation is too great, the descent can be a disaster” (52).