

**“Tell Them He Jumped from a Whale-Boat!”:
Moby-Dick’s Pip, Black Childhood, and the Discord of American Slavery**

While nineteenth-century literary representations of black childhood are limited, one prominent example in a canonical text of American literature often goes without commentary in terms of what it tells us about the period’s cultural ideology of blackness or childhood. In Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), the African American ship-boy Pip becomes a prophetic jester-like character after he survives a plunge into the ocean. Following this incident, Pip refers to himself in the third person and refutes his identity, responding to shipmates who call for him by asking, “Pip? whom call ye Pip? Pip jumped from the whale-boat” (391). Pip suggests that while his physical body may be aboard the Pequod, his spirit remains in the watery fathoms below the sea’s surface. Pip’s break with reality happens shortly after second mate Stubb reminds Pip of his status as slave. Having been previously regarded favorably as the “tender-hearted,” “bright,” and “pleasant” tambourine-playing child (391), Stubb tells the boy, “We can’t afford to lose whales by the likes of you; a whale would sell for thirty times what you would, Pip” (321). Here, the text crosses the binary ideas of identity that exist for a black child in antebellum America—that of idealized innocent and that of enslaved, dehumanized object. Confronted with this dissonance, Pip cannot remain rational when forced to see the irrationality and brutality of this reality. In my paper, I will explore the ways in which *Moby-Dick* confronts the discord of slavery to the American project of democracy through Pip, and I’ll consider how the ocean—the space where Pip understands his soul to be after his jump from the whale-boat—functions as a liminal space to question American antebellum ideology as manifested through childhood, slavery, and whaling.