

No Journey, No Whale

“Woe to him who seeks to please rather than to appall!” -Herman Melville

This is a truth I have found great comfort and guilt in. It upholds my self-imposed, staunch truths and absolves me from my indiscretions. I have long lived by the idea that bluntness, if true, is a necessary evil in a world that often begets coddlers. As an English teacher in an American school system, the pleasing I witness on a regular basis is beyond me. Kids pass through classes where they didn't acquire fundamental skills, just for the sake of turning the tassel. And there's nothing I can do about it. Parents and students are even appalled at the idea of not being thrown their metaphorical bone. Every undeserved pass on an assignment and softened comment is another bone thrown.

Therein lies the relentless acquisition of a “whale”. We need a participation trophy, a standing, a marker, or some signifier of accomplishment in order to *feel* accomplished. Herman Melville spends 300 some-odd pages detailing Ahab's plight to capture this whale and another 300 pages describing the “blubber” of the whale itself, but alas, no whale is caught. And this sentiment is seen in the cultural response to *Moby-Dick* as well, with the text viewed as a failure 175 years ago. But that's a sweet, appalling irony. I believe there's no journey worth making if a whale is always promised at the end; however, the world may not agree.

In my teaching practice, I have learned to push against the coddling by deconstructing the typical safe space. If everyone and their ideas are welcome without any pushback, students can feel “safe” in the classroom. This idea leans towards its own kind of whale of palatability or pleasing that I oppose. A classroom where poor and offensive ideas go unchallenged doesn't protect students, it shelters them. Instead, I situate my classroom as a brave space. Students are not off-limits from pushback and their ideas and thoughts should be pressure tested. That is life. After the bone of graduation is thrown to them, the bones of life are few and far between. I explicitly award the journey and the process, not agreeability.

This mindset drives my need to appall. Students need to see that ideas are worth being tested because that's what life does to a person and what good literature is able to convey. I want to be moved in some way when reading someone's writing. I don't need the happy ending or the most refined plot, I need the journey. The best part about literature is its ability to move people. That feeling can't be automated or summarized without reading and experiencing it yourself. The ability to become engulfed in literature is the very purpose that makes it worth reading. So when we reward others with the whale without the journey, the journey itself becomes obsolete.

This position fills me with guilt at times. Am I being rude for wanting struggle for others and my students? Do I come across as a contrarian instead of genuine? I'm the person being appalling in the eyes of others, and I need to be okay with the responses as a result. Pushing students and sitting with discomfort comes easily to me, but it may not to others. Melville died with the shadow of his final works casting over the comfort of his positively received ones. *Moby-Dick*, arguably one of the most profound texts in the literary canon, was not vindicated until handed the very whale it argues against. While I believe the journey itself is worth it, it's probably an appalling take to most.