

Uncovering Comedy: Explorations of Humor in 19th Century American Literature

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Introduction

Comedy's pleasure comes in part from its ability to dispel anxiety, as so many of its theoreticians have noted, but it doesn't simply do that. As both an aesthetic mode and a form of life, its action just as likely produces anxiety: risking transgression, flirting with displeasure, or just confusing things in a way that both intensifies and impedes the pleasure. Comedy has issues.

-Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, "Comedy Has Issues"

For the lay reader, 19th c. American literature may evoke an off-putting cluster of adjectives—dense, polemical, and challenging, for example. This project argues that “funny” should join that list, and that the humor of this period’s literature is central to its significance. One might assume that I am looking for comedy in exactly the wrong place. Readers likely consider *Moby-Dick* or *The Scarlet Letter*, for example, as pallid, allegorical endeavors, the *furthest* thing from being humorous. However, in the following chapters, I hope to show that a critical eye reveals a plethora of satire, wit, irony, and jokes. Further, I will show how humor operates for key authors—including James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville, and Fanny Fern—as a central mechanism through which to engage with pressing questions about gender, sexuality, race, and more.

Before proceeding, however, we must examine the history of American literature to understand why comedic writing of the era is so frequently overlooked. Walter Blair explains this reality of early American writing in his *Native American Humor*:

As its history reveals, the process of recognition by American writers of the literary possibilities of native characters was a lengthy one and also a fairly complicated one. Though some evidence concerning the process is no longer discoverable, enough evidence exists to point to a process of the sort one would expect—a slow accretion of details until at last native figures came to be generally perceived. (Blair 17)

The first American writers, therefore, were just discovering the ability to create literary narratives—comedy included, or even especially—out of their own stories and cultural traditions. Authors had to relearn what could elicit laughs in this completely foreign landscape and perhaps, more importantly, define “the comic possibilities of the American scene and American character” (Blair 16). So, modern day readers are not entirely mistaken for considering early American texts as dry or unfunny— humor in literature was still in its nascent form.

But after a few decades of experimentation in the late-18th and early 19th centuries, comedy became a tool for writers who embraced vibrant American personalities and played on the uncertainty of life in the developing nation (Blair 38). The reason for this shift, understandably, cannot be easily explained or traced back to one moment in history. Blair proposes theories such as the surge of newspapers edited for a broader range of readers, as well as the election of Andrew Jackson championing the common person and their influence in popular comedy. Whatever the reason, in “about 1830, American humor, losing its nebulous quality, becomes a graspable phenomenon” (Blair 39).

American writing from this point onwards developed into a myriad of styles and branches, some of which includes comedic categories. Yankee humor, characterized by incorporating colloquial dialect and authentic New England characters, developed

simultaneously (c. 1830-1867) alongside Old Southwest humor which utilized oral narratives and depicted “various stages of civilization naturally juxtaposed in stretches between settled sections and frontiers” (Blair 62). Or consider the cohort of humorists that surfaced after the middle of the century, whose

Affiliations with the earlier [groups of writers] are not hard to see. The synopses of their biographies reveal that they, like the Southwestern humorists, were men of the world... but a study of their writings will show that they differ chiefly in being more versatile than the earlier writers who have been considered— that they have taken over the ways of earlier writers, not only of New England and the Southwest, but of other sections as well. (Blair 105)

American comedic writing had greatly developed from its fledgling roots, to the point where different writers could be branded under certain genres which then reflexively influenced each other. Blair’s account reveals a tension: despite the emergence and proliferation of comedic writing in the 19th century, humor continues to seem marginal to the canon.

Now travel two centuries forward, finding Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai in their essay “Comedy Has Issues,” grappling with an apparent paradox in today’s comedy. On the one hand, there is a growing expectation for humor in quotidian situations. The authors note “the demand for play and fun as good and necessary for social membership” (Berlant & Ngai 237). On the other hand, the boundary between what is considered appropriate and inappropriate comedy is policed with ever-greater vigilance. Younger generations in particular have been negatively associated with “political correctness,” a style of “humorlessness” (Berlant & Ngai 240). The authors turn to theory to better understand how and why comedy can go from innocent to biting, from calming to uncomfortable, and from socially necessary to “having issues.”

Thinking about the instability of humor in our contemporary moment makes it less surprising to encounter its unclear status in 19th c. American literature. Humor is fundamentally

unstable. It is the epitome of a double-edged sword, sometimes used to empower people while also capable of perpetuating racist, classist and other oppressive power dynamics. In our moment, humor can seem everywhere and nowhere. Our mass culture is said to be both frivolous and humorless. So, too, in a study of 19th c. American literature, we have to be attuned to styles of comedy that can shift in and out of focus, and take on different—even opposed—political valences.

My first chapter considers the aforementioned *Moby-Dick* (1851), but from an angle that differs from critical readings of the novel that concentrate on the thoroughly researched relationship between Captain Ahab and the white whale, Moby Dick. Inspired by a claim made by Melville scholar John Bryant, I instead study the novel's relationships between humor, race and homosociality (a term developed by gender theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick). These three notions interweave throughout Ishmael's time on the *Pequod* and illustrate Melville's complicated social and political outlooks. He explores, and encourages, queer dynamics between his characters while strategically using humor to disguise such taboo pairings. Non-White characters are unfortunately denigrated as a byproduct of Melville's comedic writing that explores homosexuality, which begets the question: why does Melville choose to successfully celebrate a kind of queer sociability while upholding oppressive racial hierarchies?

The basis of the second chapter is built upon Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall: A Domestic Tale of the Present Time* (1854), in which a series of witty, concise chapters document the protagonist Ruth Hall living through severe poverty to achieve phenomenal celebrity status. Many scholars view Fern as one of America's earliest feminist novelists, as evinced by Ruth's becoming a successful writer in an aggressively male-dominated field. Humor here takes on a dualistic role, where it both criticizes misogynistic individuals while simultaneously allowing the same people

to invalidate female characters. Fern ultimately uses this paradox to bolster a feminist perspective, which is also fundamentally tied to Ruth's success in capitalist endeavors.

Finally, *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) from James Fenimore Cooper's *The Leatherstocking Tales* saga is analyzed in the third chapter. David Gamut, a peculiar "psalmodist" with a knack for singing, is specifically considered in this section. Gamut's notably loud quirks so strongly oppose Cooper's usually calculated, robust male characters. The wooded journey documented in the novel parallels Gamut's transition from an effeminate scholar to someone who can coexist with nature and obtain knowledge from the outdoors. Gamut does not develop in a straightforward fashion, but generally becomes less silly and more sensible with each occurrence that distances himself from traditional, feminine scholastics. Cooper's dislike of bookish learning is channeled through Gamut's transformation into a "proper" man that primarily learns from his surrounding environment.

In closely considering the role of humor across *Moby-Dick*, *Ruth Hall*, and *The Last of the Mohicans*, we can bring light to the fact that 19th c. American novels reveal the power, but also imprecision, of comedy as a political tool. Each author purposefully crafted their brand of humor to elicit a certain response from the reader, while also interjecting their opinion on a certain social, cultural or economic reality. The following chapters do not defend or endorse the particular comedic content produced by each author; my goal is to acknowledge these elements within the writing and showcase their multi-faceted implications in each novel. It is precisely because comedy will always have "its issues" that, I argue, we must refuse the supposed humorlessness of the nineteenth-century American novel.

The Interplay of Comedy, Race and Queerness in *Moby-Dick*

When searching for masterful use of literary technique within the canon of 19th c. American literature, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* is a promising place to begin. The allegory of Ahab's whale hunt and complex interpersonal relationships coursing through the *Pequod* have garnered this novel—after its initial mixed reviews—much praise and scholarship since its debut in 1851. It was also recognized, unlike many other fictions of the time, for its clever use of comedy. A critic from *Graham's Magazine* wrote of *Moby-Dick*, “the style is dashing, headlong, strewn with queer and quaint ingenuities moistened with humor” (Bryant 230). Many of these witty moments come through ridiculous instances of shipboard chaos and other tropes of nautical life, like two crew members discussing how Captain Ahab's wooden leg could be used to plug a leak in the ship's stern (Melville 191). However, upon closer examination, humor in the novel also transcends the lighthearted moments that operate on a surface level; it dives into the depths—so to speak—of nuanced comedy.

Melville scholar John Bryant explains that *Moby-Dick* is full of Melville's “essays,” or attempts, at experimental social dynamics such as unorthodox sexual arrangements. An inherent humor is associated with sexuality in Melville's writing. Homosexuality, and the comedic

situations surrounding it, is ultimately used as a conduit "... to take readers beyond gendered sexuality toward a pansexual embrace of humanity" (Bryant 189). These sexual situations become more palatable through the use of humor, especially tied to scenes containing homosexual undertones; they may have otherwise caused anxiety to some of his readership at the time, and perhaps still today.

However, Bryant makes another significant point about sexuality in the text: "racism seems the inevitable consequence of sexuality; it comprises the instinctual mechanisms that deny a fusion of self and other" (Bryant 192). That is to say, Melville's humorous writing defuses homosexual threat while exacerbating the danger of the racial "other." I intend to consider the questions Bryant raises on this topic, but does not pursue. How are humor, sex, queerness, and race all interweaved in *Moby-Dick*? Through instances in chapters like "The Spouter-Inn" and others, we can see how Melville uses humor to alleviate the anxiety surrounding male intimacy—but often at the cost of racist reductionism towards non-White characters.

Curling Up to the Homosexual Panic

Melville introduces intimacy between Ishmael and Queequeg upon the two characters' first encounter. The lack of vacancies at The Spouter-Inn means Ishmael must share his bed with someone else. The hilarity that often ensues from two men being forced to share a bed is a trope that continues into modern storytelling. Consider the John Hughes-directed holiday classic *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*, in which the two protagonists uncannily emulate the same situation that occurs between Ishmael and Queequeg (Hughes). The scene opens to Steve Martin and John Candy's characters spooning in a motel bed, blissfully united but unaware of their physical intimacy in the lull of sleep. This scene is anticipated by Melville's chapter "The Counterpane," which illustrates the physical intimacy between Ishmael and Queequeg: "Upon

waking the next morning about daylight,” recounts Ishmael, “I found Queequeg’s arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought I had been his wife” (22). The parallel plots thicken—in Hughes’ *Trains* and “The Counterpane,” both characters wake assuming they are entangled with a woman.

Hughes simply uses a modern context to explore a dynamic central to Melville’s fiction: a story’s male protagonists balance on the edge of homosexual desire, but humor is used to diffuse the possibility of such affection. Queequeg, who “jumped out upon the floor” after Ishmael’s many attempts to wake him, seems to have this dramatic, slapstick reaction to distract readers from the gentle moment that just occurred (24). Their mishap in the bed represents a comedic predicament that resonates throughout many films and novels. Simply put, people tend to find humor in watching two heterosexual men overreact when realizing how close they had come to engaging in a physical act that would be read as queer.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “The Beast in the Closet” chapter within *Epistemology of the Closet* helps ground an understanding of the anxiety surrounding homosexuality within *Moby-Dick* and society at large. “At least since the eighteenth century in England and America, the continuum of male homosocial bonds has been brutally structured by a secularized and psychologized homophobia,” she writes (Sedgwick 185). That is to say that, for over three centuries, male-to-male relationships in American culture have been associated with perverse behavior. She hypothesizes that male entitlement and the constant expectations of masculinity demand a collaborative intimacy that approaches homosexual dynamics. Additionally, the “homosexual panic,” which Melville constantly skirts around with humor, feels almost Gothic in its origins considering how it challenges the way men examine their “public” versus “private” personas (Sedgwick 186). Constantly having to navigate the very fine lines between meeting

societal male demands while avoiding homosexual behavior (or behavior that appears homosexual) resulted in the homosexual panic and its cultural legacy. The intense reality of living on the *Pequod* with a group of men emulates this exact environment, making it a ripe setting to analyze Melville's exploration of homosociality. Melville and his audience were complicit in the phenomena explained by Sedgwick, and in order to explore such relationships without overtly homoerotic overtones, defined walls are necessary.

On top of the queer aspects of Ishmael and Queequeg's relationship, racial difference is often used as another avenue to the comedic aspects of their relationship. Michael D. Snediker in "Melville and Queerness without Character" points out they are "... two men occupying nearly opposite positions in an imperial narrative. That Ishmael is a New Englander and Queequeg a Polynesian further complicates how we think about the character's union" (Snediker 157). This complication represents how in *Moby-Dick*, and possibly other Melville novels with queer subtexts, humor often exploits, ignores, or fetishizes a racial minority. The manner in which humor is used to experiment with homosexuality is not as successful when applied to non-White characters. In the "Inn" scene, as well as many other instances throughout the novel, Melville's comedic homosocial and erotic moments are often directly associated with descriptions of characters of color like Queequeg, Pip and Fleece that fetishize their bodies and racial backgrounds.

Some of Melville's scholars have interpreted the author's forays into queer undertones and characters of differing racial background as anti-racist social commentary. Christopher Freeburg, in his "Knowing the 'Bottomless Deep'" chapter of *Melville and the Idea of Blackness*, synthesizes various perspectives and illustrates the dissenting opinions on the meanings of race in *Moby-Dick*. Michael Rogin and Samuel Otter, for instance, view Melville's racial dynamics as

critiquing the concepts of scientific racism and various court rulings that defended racial segregation (Freeburg 23). Many of these critics do not take more radical views on Melville's antiracism, which Freeburg points out in his own scholarship.

They overlook the relationship between Melville's interracial bonds and the "power of blackness" that, in my view, come in the trials of Melville's white protagonists. Melville uses race to challenge and unsettle subjects' claims to power, authority, and insight, making all truth positions precarious enough that none may survive... yet in the "power of blackness" lies Melville's use of interracial bonds to undermine one's certainty about acquiring truth and attaining progress. (Freeburg 24)

Based off of Freeburg's assertions of "certainty about acquiring truth and attaining progress," I ask why this progressive lens did not translate as completely when considering identity issues with characters of color? Melville certainly used his writing to challenge White dominant narratives, such as critiquing expansionist racism through the metaphor of Ahab and Ishmael's unforgiving pursuit of their respective goals (Freeburg 25). But one place in which this forward logic fails are the many times where comedy is used to explore queerness and make it "less scary," while similar opportunities to diffuse racial tension with humor are not seen through.

Returning to the bed-sharing scene at The Spouter-Inn, this paradigm of humor being used to explore and alleviate a queer interaction comes at the cost of racist remarks. Consider again Queequeg's arm wrapped around Ishmael. The homosocial, comedic effect is sufficiently completed by Melville simply explaining that one man was being cradled by another man. Snediker points out "interpretive obviousness" is so clear (that homosexuality is so naturally integrated into this scene), that it becomes almost unnoticeable (Snediker 166). Ishmael begins to notice how the quilted bedspread was intricately embroidered with different shapes and colors (22). His eyes keep scanning, landing again on Queequeg's arms and focusing upon his tattoos.

Ishmael recounts that “this arm of his tattooed all over with an interminable Cretan labyrinth of a figure... I could hardly tell it from the quilt... and it was only by the sense of weight and pressure that I could tell that Queequeg was hugging me” (23). Such a description quickly “others” Queequeg in this situation, as his tattoos become the dominant imagery associated with this scene. Additionally, his arm becomes one with the quilt—this helps in ameliorating the homosexual tension, as the arm is dissociated from Ishmael’s body and attached to the fabric, but also likens Queequeg’s body to an inanimate object that is produced and owned.

One could argue that Melville is promoting cross-cultural unity through this image, as his Native tattoos are blending into the traditional American quilt. Melville is markedly obsessed with interweaving different narratives and worlds in *Moby-Dick*, like the *Pequod*’s conquest relating back to American expansionism (Freeburg 33). “Interweaving” becomes literal in this moment with Queequeg’s arm becoming an extension of the quilt. However, the serious sentiment feels inappropriate after he creates this silly, queer interaction of Queequeg and Ishmael in bed. Anti-racism may have felt more authentic if this scene were taken out of context; in its current presentation, however, the humorous approach to homosexuality completely dominates any commentary.

The tension only continues to escalate as Ishmael plans how to rouse the immovable Queequeg from his slumber. He shouts Queequeg’s name and squirms around in bed, but nothing seems to do the trick. The queerness of their predicament mounts, becoming more ridiculous with each description Melville includes. One of Ishmael’s attempts includes trying “to move his arm—unlock his bridegroom clasp—yet, sleeping as he was, he still hugged me tightly, as though naught death should part us twain” (24). The scene has grown past a homoerotic encounter to something resembling a queer kinship. The natural progression of events—

seemingly some sort of tangible homosexual act—is of course avoided by Ishmael loudly yelling at Queequeg, who shook like a dog after recognizing “his hugging a fellow male in that matrimonial sort of style” (24).

Now that Melville has brushed up right against a homosexual encounter, he invites readers to dissect Queequeg through Ishmael’s eyes—a less explicit, but certainly as powerful, queer act. Ishmael’s analysis of Queequeg uses the same type of humor experienced throughout this male to male dynamic, but his gaze upon Queequeg feels predatory and condescending in this moment. Ishmael recounts “staring at him from the bed, and watching all his toilette motions; for the time my curiosity getting the better of my breeding” (25). Fetishizing non-White characters in this manner also occurs between Captain Ahab and Pip. Ahab becomes obsessed with the young Black boy, seeing his body as a map to the blackness of the sea, with his dark skin in soothing contrast to the alarming whiteness of Moby Dick (Freeburg 53). Ahab’s affinity towards Pip depends upon consuming his body as a vessel of truth and guidance, much like Ishmael is absorbing Queequeg’s body in this moment. As Queequeg dresses in front of Ishmael, Melville injects his model humor to diffuse what could potentially become a homosexual situation. Melville focuses the reader’s attention on the unconventional manner in which Queequeg dresses himself in the morning—instead of putting his pants and shirt on, Queequeg reverses the order by donning his hat and lacing up his shoes first (25). This interaction between the two male characters falls into the same formula as before, where humor is used to assuage what could potentially be a homosexual moment.

Ishmael, who continues to inquisitively observe Queequeg’s every move, ends up linking this comedic moment with Queequeg’s foreignness. His character, therefore, is reduced back to racial stereotypes while queerness’s taboos are challenged through humor. Ishmael sees his

friend as a “creature in the transition stage—neither caterpillar nor butterfly. He was just enough civilized to show off his outlandishness in the strangest possible manner” (25). Melville attempts to show Queequeg’s worth by declaring that he has certain “civilized” features, but that his personality is still dominated by the habits of his traditional culture. He partakes in many specific morning rituals—he washes his body but not his face, and then uses his harpoon to shave (25). Each instance allows for Ishmael to include some cheeky remark that takes the focus away from the strong intimacy of this moment to Queequeg’s peculiarities. Ishmael is framed as observing and not judging Queequeg in the room, but these habits are still linked to the foreign character and compared to “superior” Western norms.

Implications of “The Ramadan”

Moving on further into the novel, another chapter that explores the intimacy of Ishmael and Queequeg’s friendship is “The Ramadan.” This section of writing solidifies the bond between the two characters through a misunderstanding of one of Queequeg’s religious ceremonies. The title of the chapter itself offers the first glimpse into how Melville generalized other cultures in order to create a comedic moment within *Moby-Dick*. “Ramadan” is a term used to describe the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, which is one of fasting. Queequeg enters some sort of meditative, comatose state where he “sat like a carved image with scarce a sign of active life” (71). Therefore, any sort of foreign ritual is reduced to “Ramadan” in Melville’s repertoire. Ishmael spends much of this chapter investigating his own religious background and comparing it to Queequeg’s “pagan” rituals. He initially is very concerned by the thought of Queequeg depriving himself from food, but decides to leave him alone considering, “I cherish the greatest respect towards everybody’s religious obligations, never mind how comical” (69).

The scene continues to transpire as Ishmael tries to balance shock without being judgmental towards his new friend. This juxtaposition works as another way for Melville to champion his narrative of friendship arising in all humans, surpassing lines of race or background. He calls to his fellow Presbyterian Christians, for example, to remain accepting towards people of other creeds, as they too are imperfect humans trying to please a certain creator (70). And Ishmael tries to practice what he preaches. After accepting Queequeg's "Ramadan" for what it was, he left him alone and presumed that he would be awake soon; he instead finds that Queequeg had accidentally become locked inside their room (70). Ishmael's concern is quite notable for this newly forged friendship, suggesting queer intimacy between the two characters. His reaction is also quite dramatic—"Something must have happened. Apoplexy!"—which both integrates humor into the scene while simultaneously conveying Ishmael's deep concern for Queequeg (70).

The dynamic between both characters at this point takes on a gendered partnership. Ishmael, who becomes the over-worried "wife," opposes the levelheaded "husband" Queequeg. Ishmael's rising level of desperation calls him to demand that Mrs. Hussey break down the door, though she herself hypothesizes that Queequeg had obviously committed suicide (71). The situation builds in this farcical manner which continually emasculates Ishmael considering his overreaction and deep devotion to his roommate. And once they get inside the room, Ishmael promptly asks Mrs. Hussey to leave as Queequeg is "alive at all events; so leave us, if you please, and I will see to this strange affair myself" (72). The homosocial-emotional intimacy between Ishmael and Queequeg is now restored physically as Mrs. Hussey immediately departs the room. Ishmael's ownership of Queequeg is also reflected through this quote, considering how no one else is allowed to touch his roommate. Queequeg's relationship to "ownership"

throughout *Moby-Dick* often is used for Melville's commentary on the complications of Western capitalism. Freeburg explains that "in hyperbolic symbolism of imperial development and emergent capitalism, the moral integrity, spiritual intelligence, bravery, and propensity for companionship [is conveyed through] Daggoo, Queequeg, and Tashtego" (Freeburg 40). In this moment of queer exploration, however, the dynamic changes as Ishmael is given permission to have Queequeg all for himself. Deviations like this from anti-racist writing complicate how we read these social justice elements.

Ishmael grows desperate to awaken Queequeg from his "Ramadan," yelling and pushing at him as the night continues. He eventually confides in the reader, asking them to imagine "sleeping all night in the same room with a wide awake pagan on his hams in this dreary, unaccountable Ramadan!" (73). This quote separates Ishmael from his wifely connection to Queequeg and alleviates the anxiety about the possibility of a queer coupling between the two men. And, thankfully for all parties involved, Queequeg soon ends his meditative state; but the queerness of the moment is quickly ratcheted up when Queequeg staggers over to Ishmael and announces the end of "Ramadan" by "press[ing] his forehead" against Ishmael's (73). In this way, Melville never truly gives the reader a break from wondering how exactly Ishmael and Queequeg are involved with each other.

Another clear intention for this chapter was promoting freedom of religion and religious tolerance. Ishmael's love for Queequeg grows so large that he ends up becoming a hypocrite; all of the talk of religious acceptance in the beginning of the chapter goes out the window once Ishmael feels that this "Ramadan" could end up hurting his counterpart. As Ishmael explains to Queequeg, "it pained me, very badly pained me, to see him now so deplorably foolish about this ridiculous Ramadan of his. Besides, argued I, fasting makes the body cave in" (73). The

queerness of this coupling, therefore, is monitored by humor, but the butt of the joke once again ends up falling on an aspect of the racial minority—the “ridiculousness” of Ramadan.

On Board

Moving out of the bedroom and into the literal and metaphorical open waters, Stubb’s successful whale capture marks another moment deeper into the novel where gender, race and sexuality unite through humor. The process in which the whale is caught, butchered and eventually cooked represents the quintessence of homosocial intimacy within the text. Every man on the ship is involved in capturing this whale, as depicted by the fishing line that “went hot and hissing along every one of their wrists” (238). The imagery of this high-intensity chapter is loaded with sexual energy and euphemisms. Look at the ship and fishing line buzzing with an electric energy throughout the pages, men hollering out of an aroused excitement; and finally, the sperm whale is killed, climatically bursting “gush after gush of clotted red gore” (239). The release, viscous and carnal, alleviates the overwhelming physical energy that is built up during the hunt.

The intensity, and underlying queer energy, of this scene are subdued in the following chapters. “Stubb’s Supper” begins with another image of the ship’s men coming together to tend to the whale— “forming a tandem of three boats, we commenced the slow business of towing the trophy to the *Pequod*. And now, we eighteen men with our thirty-six arms, and one hundred eighty thumbs and fingers, slowly toiled hour after hour upon that inert, sluggish corpse in the sea” (242). Melville emphasizes the body parts of all eighteen men, and how they must work in harmony at all times.

Stubb, another important shipmate, decides to cook up his catch and introduces Fleece to the narrative. The old, Black cook hobbles around the ship with the help of his tongs and, for

being in charge of food, is not well-versed in cooking (245). Everything about Fleece is silly and lighthearted. Stubb calls him over to discuss the preparation of the whale steak, to which “this old Ebony floundered along... he bowed his arched back still over at the same time sideways inclining his head, so as to bring his best ear into play” (245). Fleece’s fragility serves two purposes: first, it carries a gendered reading in that his weakness compliments his feminine, domestic role as a chef. Secondly, his treatment conveys a highly racialized connotation considering he is a Black man. Fleece’s race is starkly noticeable in these pages because he is so markedly different from all the men around him—more specifically, White men. Freeburg writes on this specific juxtaposition between Black and White characters throughout “Knowing the Bottomless Deep,” explaining how the whiteness of *Moby Dick* contrasts the blackness of the expansive, mysterious ocean (Freeburg 38). This dissimilarity heightens how othered Fleece feels in this already derisive moment.

Stubb continues to assert his dominance over Fleece by ordering him to silence the noisy sharks on the side of the ship, as only “civil” sharks can join for his steak meal (245). Fleece, in another risible moment, takes this seriously and heads to the side of the deck. “Fellow-critters,” he says to the sharks, “I’se ordered here to say dat you must stop dat dam noise dare. You hear? Stop dat dam smackin’ ob de lips!” (245). Melville’s use of dialect is troubling but vivid. Stubb, playing more into the antics, critiques Fleece for daring to use profanities when addressing his “audience.” Fleece accordingly changes his tone, renaming the sharks “your voraciousness, fellow-critters” (246). Humor takes on yet again another function, powering certain characters—Stubb in this case—to poke fun at weaker people like Fleece. Racialized power dynamics between characters are therefore encouraged by the humor instead of hindered.

Nevertheless, Fleece's docile obedience seems believable because of his racial background. Fleece is chastised throughout the scene in a manner that establishes a master-servant dynamic between himself and Stubb. For example, Stubb asks Fleece about his age once he finishes addressing the sharks. Fleece grumpily responds, which completely shifts the mood of the encounter from playful to stern. "Silence! How old are you, cook?" shouts Stubb, to which he finally answers 90, but "gloomily" (247). This statement, importantly, is rather comical—of course Fleece is not 90 years old. Such language infantilizes Fleece and feels even more emasculating because of his racialized subservience to Stubb. It is interesting to see the ways in which certain races in Melville's writing merit more respect than others. Queequeg, a Native Oceanian, also falls under many stereotypes in *Moby-Dick*. But there is a clear sense that Melville is trying to balance his "savageness" with redeeming, positive qualities, perhaps because of his desire to defend Native peoples against U.S. expansionism (Freeburg 25). The racist humor surrounding Queequeg, then, feels more strategic and intentional. But when it comes to Fleece, his character qualities do not seem to move past silliness and absurdity. The lack of depth behind his character makes any humor applied to Fleece feel more flat, biting and prejudiced.

"The Monkey Rope" continues the exploration of fraternal bonds, with Ishmael describing an impenetrable, emotional and physical bond between himself and Queequeg. "Queequeg was my own inseparable twin brother... he, one way or another, has this Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals" (266). Such an intense, bodily link between the two transgresses the norms of strictly platonic, male kinship and crosses over into a queerer territory. Ishmael, in this stage of the text, has created a dynamic with Queequeg that navigates between the realms of friendship, romance, and a racialized parental dominance. The latter of these

qualities most often arises in the moments when Ishmael begins to speak about Queequeg's religion, ethnicity, and "savage" race. The confluence between the romantic and parental readings appears in "The Monkey Rope" when Ishmael recognizes how dangerous their situation is: Queequeg is perilously strapped to his belt, slaughtering a whale in the sea. He imagines fraternal connections throughout the world and his literal ties to Queequeg, wondering if "poor Queequeg... only prayed to his Yojo, and gave up his life into the hands of his gods" (267).

Ishmael's language can be read as a sincere attempt to understand how his companion was able to cope under these extreme moments of duress. And, for the most part, this is true when considering the character's intentions. However, this line exemplifies how Ishmael is only able to, and only wishes to, relate to Queequeg in his own convenience. He never takes the time to properly learn about Queequeg's religious beliefs, as he still refers to the god as a "Yojo" and continually limits his understanding to these misnomers even after "Ramadan." The connection between the two men grows greater throughout each chapter, but it faces constraints that end up revolving around tokenizing certain elements of marginalized characters. Homosocial and queer relationships are only able to emerge under these set guidelines.

Queequeg manages to successfully butcher the whale and escape the treacherous conditions of his task. The crew, waiting to celebrate his bravery with proper libations, ends up in a humorous misunderstanding due to a certain spice:

"Ginger? Do I smell ginger?" Suspiciously asked Stubb, coming near. "Yes, this must be ginger," peering into the as yet untasted cup. Then standing incredulous for a while, he calmly walked towards the astonished steward slowly saying "Ginger? ginger? and will you have the goodness to tell me, Mr. Dough-Boy, where lies the virtue of ginger? Ginger! is the sort of fuel you use, Dough-Boy, to kindle a fire in this shivering cannibal? Ginger!—what the devil is ginger? Sea coal, fire wood, Lucifer matches, tinder, gunpowder, what the devil is ginger, I say, that you offer this cup to our poor Queequeg here?" (267)

Stubb's tirade illustrates a moment in which homosocial anxiety is released while condescending non-White characters like Queequeg. The ginger-confusion is amusing because the order of events that occur is so surprising. After a near-death experience butchering a whale, the last thing anyone would crave is a medicinal ginger potion. The beverage allows Melville to distract from the fierce, queer imagery earlier on in the chapter by focusing on Aunt Charity's feminine silliness and how misled she was in thinking that Dough-Boy could serve this herbal concoction onboard (268). Such details make it harder to recognize the racist language Stubb uses to describe Queequeg, especially the line "to kindle a fire in this shivering cannibal" (268). Stubb suggests here that Queequeg not only needs alcohol because he survived this difficult situation, but that nothing other than strong liquor can be used to praise him due to his wild, uncivilized nature. The ginger drink, then, is not just a comedic accident to the characters, but an actual offense to Queequeg and his "savage" needs. Such is the other half in which the comedy operates—and all is ameliorated when Stubb returns from below deck with two bottles, "the first contained strong spirits, and was handed to Queequeg; the second was Aunt Charity's gift, and that was feely given to the waves" (268).

Inside the Whale

Some of the most intuitive queer readings of *Moby-Dick* are centered on the chapters that detail the harvesting of whale spermaceti. Snediker, again in "Melville and Queerness Without Character," points to the "Squeeze of a Hand" chapter, which depicts crewmates working in very close corners as they package the sticky substance. He acknowledges the natural conclusion of "*Sperm? Same-sex hand squeezing? Surely, readers ejaculate, this must be gay!*" (Snediker 167). And certainly, there are many reasons to consider these moments with heavy homosexual connotations. The consistency of the substance itself, groups of men handling it together, and,

most strikingly, the word “sperm” feel overtly sexual and encourage interpretation of these scenes within that tone. Snediker acknowledges these temptations while challenging readers to push back the more literal, queer associations of these vocabularies (Snediker 167).

Another important chapter that combines this notion with the racial tensions throughout the novel is Tashtego (a Native harpooner) being rescued from the mouth of the sperm whale in “Cistern and Buckets.” The first tastes of queerness in this chapter do, in fact, center on harvesting spermaceti. Melville details the involved process: “Inserting this pole into the bucket, Tashtego downward guides the bucket into the Tun, till it entirely disappears; then giving the word to the seamen at the whip, up comes the bucket again, all bubbling like a dairymaid’s pail of new milk” (283). To further the already pronounced sexual undertones, Melville includes even more vivid descriptions of the process that end up feeling like unmistakable euphemisms. After Tashtego has emptied most of the spermaceti, he must forcefully scrape the edges of the whale’s reservoirs with a phallic apparatus. “Tashtego has to ram his long pole harder and harder, and deeper and deeper into the Tun...” (283). It goes without saying that the homosexual quality of this scene is quite overt.

But considering the racial implications and humorousness within these pages of the text offer a more insightful interpretation of queerness. After harvesting the last bits of “fragrant sperm” from the carcass, Tashtego inexplicably lost grip of the cable hoisting him into the whale where “... with a horrible oily gurgling, he went clean out of sight!” (284). This misstep could be seen as a complete tragedy, a death sentence for Tashtego. But the very nature of the accident is so bizarre that the moment becomes farcical. And the fact that all the shipmates completely disregard these circumstances results in a melodramatic, comical scene. Additionally, Melville finishes the chapter by comparing Tashtego’s accident to an Ohio “honey-hunter” being

swallowed into the sap of a tree (286). Juxtaposing this drama with the idiosyncratic, oceanic environment leads to a marked comedic dissonance.

Melville often explores homosociality by creating slapstick comedic moments around instances of male kinship that may otherwise be read as anxiety-inducing forays into same-sex eroticism. Upon Tashtego's tumble into the whale cavity, Daggoo foolishly sticks a small bucket inside to retrieve him, which prompts Stubb to chastise his poor logic (284). The insanity of the situation continues to escalate until, finally, Ishmael describes a sudden splash into the water—"my brave Queequeg had dived to the rescue" (285). Queequeg's heroism, and Ishmael's response to it, describes a level of male intimacy that transcends the queer readings of earlier sexual images of sperm and other bodily fluids. Queequeg decides to interrupt the lackluster attempts to rescue Tashtego by volunteering his own life. Such dedication represents an intrinsically strong male connection between Queequeg and Tashtego, further elevated by Ishmael calling Queequeg by the descriptor "my brave." But this sentiment conflicts with the established oddity of the situation, exacerbated by the manner in which Queequeg rescues Tashtego. He drives a knife into the side of the whale, where he believes Tashtego's head should be, and reaches into the wound. "A leg was presented; but well knowing that was not as it ought to be, and might occasion trouble; he had thrust back the leg, and by a dexterous heave and toss, had wrought a somerset upon the Indian" (285). And with this imagery, Ishmael distorted this dramatic moment into a conceit for childbirth.

Masculinity, affection, humor, and sex all interplay together during this scene on top of the racial dynamics. Tashtego, who is described as "Indian," "a wild Indian," and "a Turkish Muezzin," joins Queequeg in being a racially ambiguous, exotic character (284). The fact that Queequeg is the only person that makes a valiant effort to save him could have been a moment of

kinship between non-White characters. But the possible poignancy is discounted by the offbeat analogy to pregnancy: “And thus, though the courage and great skill in obstetrics of Queequeg, the deliverance, or rather, delivery of Tashtego, was successfully accomplished” (285).

This interaction uses humor to assuage possible homosexual qualities among all of the men, but most notably stages the non-White characters as objects of mockery. Racialized allocation of humor, and who benefits or suffers from a joke, follows the same pattern present through many comedic scenes in *Moby-Dick*. These depictions only represent a few of the many more instances of comedy interweaving with race and sexuality in Melville’s elaborate writing. It is the job of the reader to determine why something “funny” might actually be complicit in a more nuanced, prejudiced behavior.

Funny Fanny Fern— Duality of Humor in *Ruth Hall*

Aristotelian mimesis, a philosophical theory, states that people intrinsically create artwork based off of their own realities (Bruck 190). Or more exactly, that the narratives included in visual and literary art can be traced back to actual instances throughout the creator's life. Perhaps an author unknowingly characterizes a protagonist in the likeness of a friend, or a painting is inspired by a childhood memory— this authenticity, arguably, is what makes the story being told believable. *Ruth Hall: A Domestic Tale of the Present Time* by Fanny Fern masterfully navigates this space, blurring the line between fiction and biography. Professor Nancy Walker writes,

After two marriages, one ending in death and the other ending in divorce, [Fern] turned to writing to support herself. When her sketches were rejected by her brother, Nathaniel Parker Willis, editor of the Home Journal, her career was championed by James Parton, who later became her third husband (Walker 7).

Fern incorporates each of these biographical elements—most notably in the resemblance of her brother to the character Hyacinth—into the story of Fern's eponymous protagonist.

Another reverberation of Fern's life into *Ruth Hall* is, fittingly given her background, comedy. Her columns in the *New York Ledger* featured biting satire and a style described by a reviewer as "acute, crisp, sprightly, knowing, and though sometimes rude... humorous" (Walker 8). A funny woman was unnerving to many, as she represented a dangerous deviation from domesticity. Female duties included Christian ideals, such as caring for her children and her husband, leading women and ministers alike to arrive at the genre of sentimental literature (Walker 6). Ann Douglas in *The Feminization of American Culture* explains that sentimentalism,

Asserts that the values a society's activity denies are precisely the ones it cherishes; it attempts to deal with the phenomenon of cultural bifurcation by the manipulation of nostalgia. Sentimentalism provides a way to protest a power to which one has already in part capitulated. (Douglas 48)

Wit, in contrast, represents an adroit control of creativity and intelligence. Walker shows that "sentimentality exerts a passive, often subversive power; wit, on the other hand, is a direct and open expression of perceptions" (Walker 6). Wittiness as a reclamation of intellectual power is striking throughout *Ruth Hall*. Take the pun, for example; an old-as-time style that, despite its groan-worthiness, asks for an impressive understanding of both diction and comedy. Consider this moment towards the end of the novel with Ruth's daughter:

"Will you have some soup, little puss?" said Mr. Walter, after they were seated at the table, pulling one of Nettie's long curls. "Ask my mother," replied the child, with a quizzical look; "she's the soup-erintendent." (Fern 240)

Nettie's ability to craft such a joke is unrealistic for her young age—Fern is showing that resistance through wit is being instilled in the next generation of women. Critics praise novels by Fern, Caroline Kirkland, Frances Whicher and other writers for using satire as a "part of their rebellion against widely-held notions of a woman's 'proper' role in American culture" (Walker 6). I hope to complicate this assertion by showing how, rather,

humor in *Ruth Hall* is actually utilized dualistically: first, by men to oppress and “write off” women, and second, by women championing themselves and their livelihoods in capitalist society. The tension between these two categories has not been thoroughly explored through a critical lens before, and by discussing them I hope to offer further insight into the complicated proto-feminism at work in Fern’s writing.

Comedic Control: Patriarchal Oppression Through Humor

Humor is consistently at odds in *Ruth Hall*, functioning as a tool for women to reclaim agency while simultaneously serving as a conduit for patriarchal aggression. Many male characters, as well as women who have completely ascribed to patriarchal standards, use jokes to denigrate women and remind them of their structurally subordinate place in society. Dr. and Mrs. Hall, the parents of Ruth’s husband Harry Hall, build off each other to continually mislead Ruth into thinking she is always at fault. Mrs. Hall’s extreme beliefs about the rigidity of feminine gender roles satirize the strict confines of domesticity. For example, minutes after their introduction, Mrs. Hall makes clear that she hopes Ruth does not,

Read novels and such trash. I have a very select little library, when you feel inclined to read, consisting of a treatise on “The Complaints of Women,” an excellent sermon on Predestination... any time that you stand in need of rational reading come to me. (14)

Mrs. Hall is the antithesis to Ruth Hall’s amenable personality, and therefore operates as a caricature of conservative 19th century men and women. This quote illustrates that Mrs. Hall’s hatred of “novels and such trash” does not come from any sort of sound reasoning, but from of her deep-seated suspicions of women’s knowledge. Her choice of “The Complaints of Women,” combined with the topic of Predestination, represent Mrs. Hall’s notions that women are fixed, or “predestined,” to a narrow role in society that includes very little personal agency. Fern’s use of

satire undercuts “upright” characters like Mrs. Hall, considering her preposterous demands, but at the cost of Ruth being genuinely traumatized by other characters.

Consistently sour, Mrs. Hall complains about her son’s property in a later chapter when she notices Ruth climbing a cherry tree (39). Her disturbance about this relatively normal act again reminds the reader of the Mrs. Hall’s exaggerated scrutiny towards Ruth for straying from the norm. The following interaction includes Dr. Hall’s input:

“Shoot ‘em down,” said the doctor, abstractedly, without lifting his eyes from the almanac. “Shoot who down?” said the old lady, shaking him by the shoulder. “I said that romp of Ruth was up in a cherry-tree.” “Oh, I thought you were talking of those thievish robins stealing the cherries,” said the doctor; “as to Ruth I’ve given her up long ago; she never will settle down to anything.” (39)

Dr. Hall’s commentary shows the presumptiveness of both characters. By implying that Ruth will never “settle down” the doctor nearly accuses her of promiscuity; humor here operates as a mechanism to subordinate women. His biting comments underscore the violence of everyday discrimination against women—all the more so given that Ruth’s infractions are mostly fabricated. Dr. and Mrs. Hall continue criticizing Ruth for the rest of the chapter, to the point where Mrs. Hall sabotages herself. Commenting on Ruth’s curled hair, she suggests that Ruth mimic her smoother, traditional hairstyle—to which Dr. Hall points out that Mrs. Hall wears a wig (40). Fern highlights the conundrum of patriarchal standards here, as even Mrs. Hall, who is very dedicated to traditional gender roles, ends up becoming the subject of masculine scorn. Emily Toth’s “A Laughter of Their Own: Women’s Humor in the United States” discusses how both sexes were often depicted as complicit in the misogynistic pandemic of these early-American female-authored texts: “Women writers have not produced savage criticisms of male bodies—but they have criticized the *choices* both sexes make: affectations, hypocrisies, irrationalities” (Toth 201). Mrs. Hall partakes in the “irrationalities” of patriarchy that alter her

perceptions of reality, eventually leading to such hypocritical statements about hair. Even though she does technically choose to make these remarks, the situation is not so straightforward—misogyny is internalized within this deeply patriarchal society and colors every piece of Mrs. Hall’s dialogue.

Problematic decisions often end up serving as creator of comedic situations, as well as social commentary, in *Ruth Hall*. Ruth’s daughter Daisy and husband Harry both die—in what would usually constitute as quite morose scenes—with parallel comedic structures and men determining “right and wrong.” In the first episode, Ruth relies on her maternal intuition to sense that Daisy’s shortness of breath was not from a cold as Harry suggested, but something much more severe (42). Harry’s presumptiveness, while not baleful, serves as a precursor to Dr. Hall’s accusations in the upcoming pages. Harry sends someone to fetch his father, who upon hearing the circumstances says,

Pooh! Pooh! Is that all you woke me up for? The child was well enough this noon, except a slight cold. Ruth is full of notions... She’s always a-fussing with that child, and thinking if she sneezes, that she is going to die. It’s a wonder I don’t die myself, routed out of a warm bed, without my wig at this time. (44)

Fern’s depiction of Dr. Hall bald and shivering in the cold is silly enough to distract the reader from Daisy’s potentially serious illness. What seems to make this situation especially funny is just how bluntly Dr. Hall speaks; his behavior falls into an American comedic tradition of transparency. “A principle trait of American humor is its anti-romanticism,” explains author Sculley Bradley. “We love to puncture an illusion, to burst an iridescent bubble of hot air. Pretensions of grandeur, false family pride... annoy us, and we enjoy destroying them with the sharp weapon of irreverence” (Bradley 64). Dr. Hall has absolutely no “family pride” and is

completely irreverent towards every character, making him a paragon of Bradley's comedic theory.

Simultaneously, this comedic "writing off" is another way in which Fern depicts a female losing agency over her own life through the avenue of harsh, male humor. Ruth's judgments turn out to be correct, as her daughter's condition only worsens in the coming days, so Harry is sent to fetch his own father. Harry is at first met with the same excuses as before, but his urgency finally convinces the old man to take "his wig from the bed post, and put it on his head... and returning four times to tell 'Mis. Hall to be sure and bolt the front door after him" (46). The ridiculous image of the doctor putting on his wig is used again, and Fern points out the oddities of a long marriage with the description of locking the door. Readers get a glimpse of female agency in this moment with Dr. Hall again leaving his home at night for Daisy, but this unravels into an instance where humor silences a female character. Dr. Hall is leaving the house at such a leisurely pace, also noted by telling his wife "four" times to bolt the door, and reminding his son that "I shall be glad if I don't get a sick spell myself... come, come, don't drive so fast; my bones are old, and I don't believe in these gay horses of yours" (46). There is absolutely no urgency to his tone despite Daisy's clearly poor condition.

In the next chapter, Dr. Hall arrives at the house and finally comprehends how far Daisy has deteriorated. "The doctor advanced... and gazed steadily at Daisy without speaking," describes Fern. He evaluates the situation and simply remarks "in an unmoved tone" that the girl is past any chances of saving (47). His sudden shift from a curmudgeonly old man to an actual doctor, dropping all affect, highlights Dr. Hall's hypocritical nature. He spends every second before this moment criticizing Ruth for being overdramatic, but now ignores her correct predictions and pleads for Harry to let his daughter die in peace (47). This change in behavior is

sharpened by Fern's humor; shifting Dr. Hall from wisecracking to morose demonstrates the fragility of masculinity in the face of error. He never apologizes to Ruth for his suspicions or tries to treat Daisy. Humor was used to "write off" Ruth, and she never receives retribution since Dr. Hall is incapable of ever admitting that he was at fault.

Such dark humor is soon paralleled when Harry contracts typhus and follows in the footsteps of his daughter's slow death. Dr. Hall is called in once more, but he is only concerned with demonstrating his superior intelligence. He stares at Ruth while chastising her for providing inadequate typhus treatment and has a peculiar urgency to warn his son of his impending death (63). Ruth's natural response to comfort Harry is masked by Dr. Hall's completely unabashed desire to ready his son to die—he seems more involved in this than feeling any sort of emotion, a reaction so insensitive that it becomes comical. "Hush! He is coming to himself," warns Ruth, "'Then I must tell him that his hours are numbered,' said the doctor, thrusting his hands in his pockets and pompously walking round the bed" (63).

Dr. Hall's brazenness can again be explained by an American comic tradition of "a rude shock," which dates back to the realities of pioneer life. Building a house to have it burn down, moving to the West to only find "fool's gold"—persevering through these casualties and laughing at them has encouraged this style of American humor since the dawn of the nation (Bradley 65). Dr. Hall's odd behavior allows readers to move past Harry's death rather quickly. Fern's characterization helps get a laugh in and move the plot along, but again disparages Ruth throughout the process. This pattern of women being devastated by "masculine humor" dominates the first section of *Ruth Hall*—only when Ruth is completely defeated and stripped of her identity does a gradual, feminist reclamation begin.

Taking Charge

While this motif of undermining humor in *Ruth Hall* does often times disparage women, Fanny Fern makes sure to redeem these instances towards the larger goal of her novel's feminist commentary. There is an inherent clashing of pain and joy in the comedy of *Ruth Hall*. Much of Fern's writing in the early stages of the novel uses humor to appeal to reader's ethos and pathos, focusing on Ruth's emotional trauma from patriarchal oppression. Fern is able to switch gears and take on a more explicit feminist tone once her protagonist has hit rock bottom and can begin an upward climb. Ruth faces countless misfortunes after her husband's death, including being forced to send her daughter Katy to live with her cruel grandparents. A particular conundrum arises for Ruth because all of her relatives, who are wealthy enough to support her but remain profoundly self-centered, refuse to help her during these trying times.

One of Ruth's classmates, a well-off yet sensible woman named Mary Herbert, points out in a tangential scene that Ruth's father, brother and cousins all have sizeable fortunes. But her husband clarifies that these conditions actually "... make it all the harder for Mrs. Hall to get employment; because, people knowing this, take it for granted that her relatives help her, or *ought* to, and prefer to give employment to others whom they imagine need it more" (97). Illogical decisions like this fits into a larger theme of mismatched frugality in *Ruth Hall*, as scholar Julie Wilhelm notes, "Although [Dr. and Mrs. Hall] stand in the privileged position to spend, they compulsively save at the cost of everyone around them" (Wilhelm 201).

Fern begins to center the plot's purpose on having Ruth rebuild her life through the help of a new career. Striving for economic security shifts Ruth's relation to comedy; taking control of her finances also means claiming ownership of how humor operates in her life. She must take on the burden of trying to be self-sufficient as a widower in a heavily patriarchal family and society. The fact that Ruth's recovery is so attached to finance is one of the most notable aspects

within this novel. Toth explains that it was exceptional for female humorists of the time to “venture into the public (male) world of commerce, politics, and diplomacy” (Toth 201). Fern not only “ventures” into the male domain, but makes entrepreneurial success fundamental to her protagonist’s success. At the end of Ch. 40, Mary’s husband Mr. Herbert exclaims, “God help poor Mrs. Hall, then. *We* must contrive some way to help her, Mary—help her to *employment*, I mean, for I know her well enough to be sure that she would accept of assistance in no other way” (98). His quote, while perhaps reading as slightly stilted for a man who barely knew Ruth, conveys an unequivocal feminist undertone: Ruth needs and deserves a job, as she faces unfair discrimination based on her formerly financially secure background.

Another way in which Fern amplifies comedy throughout the novel is the use of the narrator’s tone. This tone, like many elements in the novel, bolsters itself once attached to Ruth’s newfound economic resilience. A bizarrely intense application process for a job at city hall, in Ruth’s path to reemployment, could have functioned as additional time where humor is underscores how female characters are “written off” by men. Including the narrator’s strong input shifts the purpose to something entirely different. “*Very* respectable were the gentlemen of whom that committee was composed,” explains the storyteller. “*Respectable* was written all over them, from the crowns of their scholastic heads to the very tips of their polished boots” (126). This input, and especially the sarcastic tone of it, clues the audience into the fact that this interview will be nothing more than a sham. And it is true—the evaluators, with absurd rhyming names like “Mr. Squizzle” and “Mr. Fizzle,” feel like symbols of staunch conservatism rather than actual people (Wilhelm 207). Ruth ends up being rejected for the position despite her ardent efforts. However, the rejection is somewhat of a relief considering she did not have to subject herself to this irritating coterie of men. Humor in this moment, while still presenting how women

are unjustly deceived by men, is turned around and pointed back at the perpetrators. “Ruth was *not* elected,” writes Fern. “She had been educated, (whether fortunately or unfortunately, let the sequel of this story decide,) at a school where ‘Webster’ was used instead of ‘Worcester.’ The greatest gun on the Committee was a Worcesterite” (129). Ruth’s rejection is the perfect moment to pity her; but through the narrator’s very pointed tone and witty commentary, we understand that this is not a loss for Ruth, but a success, as she evaded a completely disastrous position.

Ruth’s economic recovery is buttressed by various comedic situations in which she outwits, chides and challenges various male characters. Consider Ruth’s confrontation with Mr. Lescom over her wage. “Floy,” the penname Ruth takes on, had already accepted a deal with another editor named Mr. John Walter, who offered a value that actually rewarded her both fiscally and creatively (Mr. Lescom’s payments severely undervalued Ruth’s work). He calls her into the office to discuss the length of her columns, presumably trying to get her to write even more without any sort of compensation (189). Their meeting in the first half of the novel would most probably have consisted of Mr. Lescom putting down the defenseless Ruth. She is now in complete control of her life and has a newfound confidence that drastically changes the outcome of this interaction. “I was not aware that my article had grown any shorter,” Ruth points out. “If you would like more matter, Mr. Lescom, I wonder you have not offered me more pay” (189). Her tone is starkly unwavering and sure; this Ruth is completely different from the earlier meek victim.

Mr. Lescom falls into Ruth’s trap, saying “... women are never satisfied. The more they get, the more grasping they become. I have always paid you more than you could get anywhere else” (189). Humor here arises based on dramatic irony. The readers and Ruth know that she had already accepted a job with Mr. Walter that pays her considerably more for the same work. Mr.

Lescom keeps digging a bigger hole for himself, making statements that directly contrast the reality of the situation. He explains to Ruth that, “the law of supply and demand regulates prices in all cases. In literature, at present, the supply greatly exceeds the demand, consequently prices are low” (189). Such reasoning contradicts what is actually occurring, as her success is remarkable and has attracted the attention of other editors, making “Floy’s” writing quite competitive. The narrator’s tone, again introduced to heighten the comedic element of the situation, describes Mr. Lescom looking “smilingly at Ruth, with an air which might be called one of tyrannical benevolence; as if he would say, ‘Well, now, I’d like to know what you can find to say to that?’” (190).

But, Ruth knows exactly how she will respond. Fern creates suspense by letting the readers in on the joke while watching Mr. Lescom prepare himself for failure. Ruth’s upper hand in this relationship harkens back to how she is treated throughout the book; she deceives Mr. Lescom into thinking he is right but proves him wrong just at the last second, much like how she is fooled by countless men in the former part of the text. The truth is finally disclosed when Ruth admits to accepting Mr. Walter’s offer. “Mr. Lescom looked astonished,” writes Fern, “and gazed at Ruth without speaking, probably because he did not know exactly what to say. He had argued Ruth’s case so well, while he supposed he was arguing his own, that nothing more could be said. Mr. Lescom, in reality, valued Ruth’s services more than those of all his other contributors combined” (190). Revealing this truth to Mr. Lescom reaffirms what Ruth knew all along—these men need her much more than she needs them.

Fern’s commentary on feminist economics is further elevated when Ruth does not simply accept Mr. Walter’s offer, but instead bargains between the two editors to see who will pay her the most for “Floy’s” columns. Mr. Walter immediately assumes that Ruth’s kindness and

dedication, inherently from being a woman, are being taken advantage of by the greedy Mr. Lescom. “Just as I expected,” he says after reading Ruth’s letter describing the situation, “Lescom has worked on ‘Floy’s’ kind heart till she really feels a sort of necessity not to leave him so abruptly” (193). Ruth has strategically pitted both of these editors against each other to maximize her salary. Mr. Lescom and Mr. Walter believe that they are fighting over “Floy” and see Ruth as pawn of their publications, when in fact it is she who has the upper hand in these negotiations. Allowing the editors to duke it out represents a feminist triumph, as the two men are ironically doing all the work while Ruth sits back and maximizes her salary. Mr. Walter writes to Ruth, for example, that “I was afraid if you went to Mr. Lescom, or Mr. Tibbetts of the Pilgrim, that they would impose upon your good womanly heart... and now, ‘Floy’, please leave the whole matter to me” (194). Ruth undoubtedly understands how to protect herself from Mr. Lescom and Mr. Tibbetts, and the readers can laugh alongside her watching these men scramble to vie for her attention.

In On The Joke— Wit Challenging Male Authority

When Ruth does achieve entrepreneurial success, she also demonstrates a newfound control over humor directed at men. It is here that Fern begins to really show the other side of her comedic writing— she uses humor strategically throughout the novel to highlight male condescension toward women; however, the latter half of the book begins to shift away from this use as Ruth begins to lead her independent life. The focus seems to turn onto Fern overcoming her male opponents as humor is utilized to highlight their hypocrisy and complete lack of tactfulness. Consider Ruth’s brother Hyacinth, who Fern establishes as completely flippant from childhood, critiquing Ruth’s shoes and ill-fitting aprons before prancing off to his Italian lessons (7). These peculiarities become more humorous, and also egregious, alongside Ruth’s depressing

widowhood in Chapter 41. A certain “Mary” and “Gertrude,” who had clearly known the Hall family in the past, are shown heading to visit Ruth in her now meager apartment. Details like “that red-faced Irish girl leaning out of the front window on her elbows” and “those vulgar red bar-room curtains” cue them both of this “lowly” neighborhood and the severity of Ruth’s misfortunes (99). Gertrude begins to wonder: why does Hyacinth, very much monetarily gifted, not help his sister during her crisis?

Mary, the less empathetic of the two, has a better understanding of the predicament. “Hyacinth has just married a rich, fashionable wife,” she explains. “And of course he cannot lose caste by associating with Ruth now; you cannot blame him” (100). Gertrude points out that this has nothing to do with his ability to offer her any support, to which Mary rebukes “Good gracious, Gertrude, do stop! If there’s anything I hate, it is an argument. It is clearly none of our business to take her up, if her own people don’t do it” (100). Gertrude’s obliviousness towards her own cruel behavior, highlighted by Mary’s inklings of social awareness, is so unaware that it becomes comical. Furthermore, her acceptance of Hyacinth’s behavior highlights the disjointedness of female realities in this world. Gertrude and Hyacinth share this disregard for others, creating a tone that is entertaining at first but deeply problematic. Mary’s character serves a significant purpose as she represents the bridge between unchecked wealth and empathy for struggling fellow females. She falls in line with a larger motif in the novel, where Fern uses one character to “[satirize] enforcers of domestic ideology, female characters who occupy positions above other women” (Wilhelm 210). This disparity, emphasized by the ridiculousness of Hyacinth’s rationality and Mary’s agreement with it, produces commentary on how subversive logic had become in *Ruth Hall*’s world.

The largest catalyst to Ruth's new life trajectory is caused by Hyacinth's dismissal of her writing. She writes to her brother, the new editor of "Irving Magazine," in hopes of reviving her old high school hobby of being a columnist; the outcome is anything but supportive. "I have looked over the pieces you sent me, Ruth," writes Hyacinth. "It is very evident that writing can never be *your* forte; you have no talent in that way... I would advise you, therefore, to seek some *unobtrusive* employment" (147). His response is so bluntly negative, especially for writing to one's own kin, that it reads as comedic. Hyacinth's vanity is steadfast throughout the novel, but in this moment when Ruth thinks she has finally found a possible career, we finally believe that he will break his demeanor and offer a position to his sister. The fact that he shows no change at all reaffirms his character's ridiculous nature and lends a humorous shock to the reader. But more importantly, this letter marks the point in which Ruth begins to use male ridicule to fuel her determination, rather than allowing it to set her back. "But they shall be heard of," says Ruth. "Sooner than he dreams of, too. I *can* do it, I *feel* it, I *will* do it" (147). After countless situations in which Ruth and other women are put down, humiliated and ignored by patriarchal preconceptions, here she decides to resist her brother's cruel language and defend her own status. The brazen rejection of the letter allows Ruth to finally realize the unjustness of her circumstances. It almost seems like she catches up at the reader at this point; we have long laughed at Hyacinth's narcissistic behavior, and Ruth seems to finally realize this too with a "bitter smile" and ignoring her brother's death sentence upon her writing career.

Talking Back

Retribution against corrupt men continues to occur as Ruth's writing career rapidly takes off through the rest of the novel. Her witty, honest columns attract loads of attention and speculation as to who exactly stood behind this "Floy" character: "All sorts of rumors became

rife about ‘Floy,’ some maintaining her to be a man because she had the courage to call things by their right names, and the independence to express herself boldly on subjects which to the timid and clique-serving, were tabooed” (170). Ruth’s ability to pass as a man is another form of feminist resistance, as it inherently threatens patriarchal elements like confidence and vocalizing one’s ideas. The men in the first half of the novel, who were humorously depicted discrediting women, now are the ones being laughed at. Ruth’s writing was primarily driven by a necessity to support her children and herself, so her ability to cause such a stir without trying foreshadows how much power she will be able to reclaim through the rest of the novel.

Speaking of problematic men in *Ruth Hall*, Hyacinth also reenters his sister’s life at the end of the novel—but this time, in a very different light. Mr. Horace Gates, a writer for Hyacinth’s *Irving Magazine*, tells an anecdote of how he spent days writing a column for the magazine only for Hyacinth to put his name on it and take credit for its positive reception (204). His spoiled, dishonest ways are evidently still at work as Hyacinth has continued to use his fiscal privilege to climb up in the journalism industry. He then opens a letter from his boss, reading “I have noticed that you have several times scissorized from the exchanges, articles over the signature of ‘Floy,’ and inserted them in our paper. It is my wish that all articles bearing that signature should be excluded from our paper...the writer is a sister of mine, and it would annoy and mortify me exceedingly to have the fact known” (205). Once more, Hyacinth completely denies his sister’s success under misogynistic attitudes and being the “superior” of the Ellet siblings. He can only ignore “Floy’s” popularity for so long, however, before acknowledging his sister’s new reality. Speaking with an acquaintance on a riverbank, Hyacinth points out a steamer named “Floy” in honor of his sister, much to the surprise of his friend (226). It is painful for Hyacinth to accept this fact, so he naturally connects Ruth’s writing achievements to a symbol of

wealth—the boat. Fern points out here that masculinity is protected by symbols of power and strength. Hyacinth does not compliment Floy’s clever language or profound social observations; instead, he immediately focuses on a piece of capital created in honor of the author.

Old habits die hard for Hyacinth, and it is entertaining to watch him swallow his pride while also upholding his obsession with social status. He blatantly lies at one point to his friend, saying he didn’t identify Floy as his sister earlier due to her “having an odd fancy for being *incog.*, and I, being in her confidence, you know, was on honor to keep her secret” (226). His previous communications with Ruth, however, prove otherwise. His companion, growing more inquisitive of Hyacinth’s dynamic with “Floy,” begins to point out the various logical flaws behind Hyacinth not divulging his sister’s identity sooner. He remembers Ruth’s troubles in getting published, her wishes to still remain anonymous, and other facts which do not line up with Hyacinth’s excuses; Fern describes how “Hyacinth very suddenly became aware of ‘an odd craft in the river,’ and was apparently intensely absorbed looking at it through his spy glass” (227). The dynamic between the two men produces a certain mirth as we witness Hyacinth awkwardly avoid the truth of the situation. And on top of that, he must face the consequences for his flippant, spoiled behavior. Fern’s characterization of Hyacinth represents the epitome of unrestrained male, capitalist privilege. Ruth’s achievements show him, despite everything he has been told and believes in, that talent can overpower fiscal and social advantages.

In the following chapters, Ruth’s confidence goes from mostly appearing in her behavior to becoming explicit through her language. She receives an offer from a publishing house to forfeit her copyright for \$800, which she imagines using to feed herself and Nettie and retrieving Katy from Dr. and Mrs. Hall (197). Such trepidation, while normally to be expected at such a significant offer, presents a challenge for Ruth in her newfound career trajectory. Fern creates

these moments of temptation for Ruth throughout her upward social climb, serving as tests for her morals and confidence levels. And in the end, she perseveres: “No gentlemen, I will *not* sell you my copyright; these autograph letters, and all other forms of friendship, love, and business, I am constantly receiving from strangers, are so many proofs that I have won the public ear” (198). Her justification from fan mail shows that Ruth no longer relies from any sort of affirmation by powerful men; she understands that only her supporters’ words matter. The constant criticism and manipulation of characters like Dr. and Mrs. Hall, Hyacinth, and greedy editors no longer affects her like before. Wilhelm describes this phenomenon, in that “Once Ruth learns how to negotiate a fair price for her writing and to distance herself from the many faces of the economy, representatives of frugality fade from the narrative” (Wilhelm 212). This epiphany is crucial in Ruth’s arc from a submissive victim to triumphant, driven female entrepreneur.

Signing Off—Letters Encompassing Ruth’s Journey

Ruth Hall features many of the letters written to “Floy” by her readers, which arguably serve as some of the most vivid and exciting pieces within the novel. Many of them utilize a comedic tone, and offer a range of high praise to biting criticism. They, in a way, represent Ruth’s life as a writer. Some are silly epistles that offer snapshot into 19th century American life.

A “Thomas Pearce” writes,

Madam, I have the honor to be guardian to a young Southern lady (an orphan) of a large fortune, who has just completed her education. She has taken a suite of apartments, and given me orders to furnish them... I have orders to procure busts of Mrs. Hemans, Miss Landon, and several other distinguished female writers, among whom Miss Le Roy includes “Floy.” (234)

Other examples include new editors wanting to falsely include “Floy” in their masthead, a grieving boy wanting her to write a eulogy for his dog, an even a pregnant woman offering Ruth her child after dreaming that she would die during labor (213). Most of these letters are

fantastical examples of how many lives “Floy” had affected. The humor highlights the importance of Ruth’s writing and confronts many male characters’ doubts about a woman’s ability to create impactful work.

One final test for Ruth comes in the form a letter from a brutally critical man:

I suppose by this time you have become so inflated that the honest truth would be rather unpalatable to you. The rest of the world flatters you—I shall do no such thing... now and then, there’s a gleam of something like reason in your writing, but for the most part they are unmitigated trash—false in sentiment—unrhetorical in expression. You are no genius... the author of “History of the Dark Ages,” which has reached its fifteenth edition, was a genius... It is my opinion, that the female mind is incapable of producing anything which may be strictly termed literature (214).

This diatribe against Ruth would have possibly destroyed her spirits if it had been written to her earlier on in the novel. But the tone of the writing feels different at this point; this is a man relying on unfounded masculine superiority to silence Ruth, but the letter feels like a complete disservice to the case championing patriarchal standards. The ending seals the deal on how irreverent this man’s argument is—“Your honest friend, William Sterns, Professor of Greek, Hebrew, and Mathematics, in Hopetown College, and author of ‘History of the Dark Ages’” (214). “Oh vanity! Thy name is William Sterns,” quips Ruth, recognizing that he had called his own book a work of genius (214). There is nothing more about written about this exchange—no time spent considering his accusations, considering the elements of his text—Fern just moves onto the next chapter. This quick transition shows that Ruth no longer even considers the men trying to discredit her existence as a female writer. “Stern’s” argument feels completely ludicrous, a relic of the machismo, archaic standards of the times, and “Floy’s” rise marks the demise of such intolerance.

From all the letters she receives, there is one in particular that is most poignant and represents a final achievement in the feminist goals of *Ruth Hall*: “Dear Floy, I am a better son, a better brother, a better husband, and a better father, than I was before I commenced reading your articles” (235). This statement represents the ultimate reclamation of a woman’s power to affect the people around her. “M.J.D’s” writing shows Ruth that every man who tried to strip her of her confidence, wisdom and power were in a way masochistic, as her writing held the knowledge to make them far better people. And she recognizes how pivotal this moment is, saying to herself “‘This will repay many a weary hour,’ as her tears fell upon the page” (235). At last, a man admits to Ruth that he could lead a better life through a woman’s guidance.

These various letters stand as a testament to the gender discrimination and societal oppression Ruth faces throughout this novel. Humor is not always so kind to her— different situations and characters encourage readers to laugh at, and not necessarily with, Ruth. However, these times which lend the power of comedy to patriarchal aggressors challenges us to consider what exactly is registering as funny in a particular scene. Is it fair to chuckle at moments with subtexts of abuse? It is difficult to say. We should enjoy watching Ruth go from housewife to “Floy” and all the comedy that ensues along the way. However, it is pertinent to simultaneously consider the way in which Fern uses humor to create commentary on female identity and class in 19th century America.

The Last of the Mohicans, an Education of Gamut

The “journey,” both in its literal and figurative connotations, is one of the most essential themes and structuring concepts in James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*. A group of settlers and Natives traverse the tangled American backwoods in the novel during the French and Indian War to transport a colonel’s daughters to safety. Throughout this pilgrimage, characters face various forces that mold their behavior and opinions. The nature and purpose of these transformations are often discussed by scholars of Cooper’s work. For instance, Joel Porte argues that *The Last of the Mohicans* mimics Homeric narratives, through the odyssey-like voyage characters undergo, while the plot lines also focus on nefarious entities like Magua who echo Miltonic falls from glory (Dekker 59). These readings underscore the serious, monumental, epic aspects of Cooper’s fiction.

David Gamut, a “psalmodist” who happens upon the travelling party near the start of the novel, initially seems like the exception to this convention. Cooper quickly establishes his persona as offbeat— Gamut launches into a long-winded explanation of his psalm book (“promulgated at Boston, Anno Domini, 1744; faithfully translated into English Metre...”) in the middle of the woods just after meeting Alice, Cora and their guide Major Duncan Heyward

(Cooper 496). He soliloquizes about irrelevant religious topics, attracts unwanted attention with his singing, and operates in a generally unbecoming way, which puts into relief the highly composed and strategic Hawk-eye (a White warrior raised by the Delaware tribe, also known as Natty Bumppo in other installments of *The Leatherstocking Tales*).

Gamut's peculiarities make it simple to assume he exists solely to serve the role of a comic buffoon. However, carefully attending to Gamut is essential in understanding the intricate politics within Cooper's fiction. By studying Gamut's comedic function, we can see a correlation between Gamut being made fun of and his transition into "correct" manhood. This arrangement, which Lora Romero names "the paternal apprenticeship system," ends up ironically emulating the traditional, female-centric education that Cooper so strongly opposes (Romero 47). He eventually does change into a "respectable" archetype—albeit nonlinearly—and shifts from a comedic foil to a more stoic, conventionally masculine figure. However, the method by which this occurs mirrors the "maternal" knowledge that Cooper so zealously critiques.

Laughter on the Frontier

To begin to understand the gendered nature of humor in *The Last of the Mohicans*, it is crucial to first examine its foundations in literary tradition. Cooper's structure, in addition to being influenced by authors like Homer and Milton, emulates one of the earliest conduits of humor in American literature—the Frontiersman. "Humor became a literary form in America when writers began to utilize in print the delight in native character, native types, and native eccentricity that had so long fertilized our oral literature" (DeVoto 71). Historian Bernard DeVoto, in his review of Walter Blair's scholarship on American humor, explains that satirizing frontiersmen like Davey Crockett became popular amongst intellectuals while, simultaneously, more fiction writers included them in their adventure tales. The parallel occurrence of these

events associated humor with the harshness of American expansionism. More specifically, as DeVoto explains, writers included “the intrusion of some low and usually rustic fellow as comedy relief to the gothic goings-on of the romantic leads” (DeVoto 72).

This tension between “rustic” and “romantic” perfectly translates into the juxtaposing characters within *The Last of the Mohicans*. Gamut’s zealous piety, which inspires his penchant for music, renders him as an extremely lofty and intellectual character. His bookishness comes across in this description as he retrieves a collection of psalms: “The stranger had drawn the book from his pocket, and fitting a pair of iron-rimmed spectacles to his nose, had opened the volume with a care and veneration suited to its sacred purposes” (497). Cooper casts Gamut as an intense intellectual; if his intricate repertoire were not academic enough, his bespectacled face completes the nerdish appearance. Contrasting the dangerousness of the novel’s world with Gamut’s seemingly unrelated monologues drives much of the humor found throughout the novel.

Cooper’s scrutiny of Gamut can be traced back to a longstanding American distrust of the “educated” English. DeVoto notes that most American humorists of the time, especially those working within the Southwestern frontier, “were amateurs. They were lawyers, doctors, country editors, army officers, planters, even parsons, anything but literary men” (DeVoto 73). Eventually, professional comedians and humorist writers made a resurgence, but the amateur roots permanently instilled a cultural distrust about anyone who was overtly academic. For Cooper, Gamut’s religious fervor represents a threatening inflexibility. His dedication to traditional learning distracted him from becoming a “proper man,” displaying how Cooper inherently associates learning and sophistication with emasculation. Consider this comparison between Heyward and Gamut:

A gleam of exultation shot across the darkly painted lineaments of the inhabitant of the forest, as he traced the route of his intended victims,

who rode unconsciously onward; the light and graceful forms of the females waving among the trees, in the curvatures of their path, followed at each bend by the manly figure of Heyward, until, finally, the shapeless person of the singing master was concealed behind the numberless trunks of trees, that rose in dark lines in the intermediate space. (498)

Cooper creates a stark binary in this paragraph relating to gender, with Gamut interestingly falling in somewhere in the middle. We first encounter the “light and graceful” sisters followed by the protective and “manly” figure of Heyward. Each of these descriptors is positive and shows the characters having some sort of clear agency over their movement. Now look at Gamut: “shapeless,” and existing within “dark lines in the intermediate space.” Additionally, each character’s placement amongst the trees further ascribes them to specific gender role. Alice and Cora exist “among the trees, in the curvatures of their path” while Heyward faces them and follows in pursuit. Gamut, like the female characters, is placed within the trees, “concealed behind the numberless trunks.” Cooper, even in the subtlest details such as these, is constantly finding ways to align Gamut with feminine imagery.

Gamut’s neutered identity represents a physical weakness caused by his book-smart intelligence. Past critics have written on Gamut’s peculiar features. Romero, for example, notes,

Gamut’s peculiar proportions are just one sign that he is the vehicle by which civilization is carried into the wilderness. Around him also accrue linked images of language, femininity, and power... Hawk-eye laments the fact that, as he puts it, although the ‘Lord never intended that man should place all his endeavors in his throat,’ Gamut had ‘fallen into the hands of some silly woman, when he should have been gathering his education under a blue sky, and among the beauties of the forest. (Romero 42)

In Romero’s reading, Gamut represents an effeminate, excessively scholarly man tainted by formal education when he should have been learning from the outdoors.

The association of femininity and knowledge causes Cooper substantial anxiety. Romero explains, “for Cooper, to read in the book of nature is to be educated through the paternal

apprenticeship system rather than the maternal representational system” (Romero 47). Gamut’s affinity for books represents the “gentle tyranny of home and woman” and fits into the wider fear of women ruining their children through overly-rigorous schooling—a popular sentiment amongst some intellectuals, of all genders, during the era (Romero 44). Educational writer Catherine Beecher, from her research on the ancient Greek system of teaching a student’s body and mind, believed the human race was creating weak offspring due to a lack of physical education (Romero 38). An even more direct attack on literal books came through the form of “momism.” Hannah More, a British author who feared most the “instituting of the reign of the mother,” disliked the rise of sentimental novels as they encouraged introspection over learning from one’s body and the world (Romero 46).

All of this suggests that Cooper and others truly worried about people losing their physical prowess by becoming fully enveloped in education which championed lectures, reading and exercising the brain over the body. Cooper highly values his Native characters for having the “ideal” type of intelligence—based on direct experience and learning in nature. Reducing all Native people to such a specific depiction further perpetuates the “noble savage” stereotype, which asserts that Natives are inherently wiser and uncorrupted due to their isolation from self-destructing Western society (Gillespie 91). The noble savage trope infantilizes and perpetually others Native people as antithetical to White populations. Cooper appears to have intended to write about Natives with reverence, but did not consider the dangers of associating them so closely with this very specific form of intelligence. Nevertheless, we must accept this as a reality of Cooper’s ideals on gender roles and to successfully track Gamut’s progress throughout the novel. I want to acknowledge the complexities of the “noble savage” as I continue to focus more so on gendered dynamics within *The Last of the Mohicans*.

Gamut's Ironic Education

Gamut's first appearance in the novel already, inadvertently, defends the "maternal" educational system. Trekking through the backwoods at the beginning of their long path ahead, the last thing Heyward, Alice and Cora would expect is the flamboyant and surreal Gamut. Heyward skeptically asks why he so eagerly wants to join them, to which Gamut explains his duty to travel with others while sharing his musical talents (494). Alice, notably, takes immediate interest in Gamut and finds comfort and his elevated diction. "The man is, most manifestly, a disciple of Apollo," cries out Alice. "I take him under my own especial protection. Nay, throw aside that frown, Heyward, and, in pity to my longing ears, suffer him to journey in our train" (494).

Notice how neatly this interaction fits into the feminine realm of education described by Beecher and others. Heyward, in charge of protecting the girls, is depicted as immediately suspicious of Gamut's interloping entrance and religious allusions. Alice has a strong affinity towards Gamut and likens him to the Roman god Apollo— indeed picked up from her time in the schoolhouse. Instead of worrying about survival knowledge and progressing forward, these two characters end up discussing songs. Cooper wants the readers to smirk at Alice and Gamut for frivolously discussing music, oblivious to the perilousness of their environment. However, this is overshadowed by how successfully this "momist" interaction occurs. Alice dominantly defends Gamut from the derision of others by "taking him under [her] own especial protection" and encouraging him to join their trip (494). Everything about Alice in this moment represents motherly, protective schooling, and she even commands Heyward to cheer up with the arrival of the "enlightened" Gamut. So far, Cooper has only bolstered the power of the maternal representation system by having Alice successfully defend Gamut against the potential scorn of

Heyward. Alice's ability to sneak in feminine knowledge foreshadows to the fact that, despite humor being central to the "paternal apprenticeship system," the ways men teach men in *The Last of the Mohicans* may have more in common with the maternal representational system than Cooper concedes.

The series of events surrounding the death of Gamut's donkey, Miriam, depicts another instance of Gamut learning about "manliness" in what can be seen as a disguised form of maternal education. Killed during one of many skirmishes with different Native groups, the donkey's death represents a huge setback for Gamut. He is quite distraught by Miriam's death and wails funeral psalms in her honor (526). Such grieving, accompanied by the other character's annoyance, makes the situation more comical than morose. However, Cooper quickly shifts the scene's tone by including Hawk-eye's opinion on the matter: "The death sits heavy on the heart of its owner... it's a good sign" (526). What felt like a more lighthearted chapter highlighting another one of Gamut's eccentric qualities now takes on a serious, weighty tone due to Hawk-eye's input. He commends Gamut for being able to accept Miriam's death as a measure of necessary fate for their journey (526).

Hawk-eye, in this scene, does help Gamut cope with Miriam's death, which steers Gamut from dramatically singing psalms to pragmatically coping with his donkey's death. But notice the fulcrum of this situation— religion. Gamut truly accepts Miriam's death because he believes it was due to religious fate, and Hawk-eye's support of his grief only reinforces the power of Christian knowledge. We also see Hawk-eye protect Gamut in this moment, much like when the group discovers him in the woods and Alice insists on him joining their trip. Cooper designed this interaction to showcase Gamut changing from crying over his dead donkey, in an over-dramatic and laughable manner, to a serious moment where Hawk-eye shows him how to

properly cope with her death as a reality of the natural world. The exchange, however, takes on more of a nurturing mood where Gamut's spirituality still dictates his change. Once again, what is meant to show Gamut becoming more serious by learning through the "paternal apprenticeship system" of the natural world divulges into a dynamic that feels much more gentle and inherently feminine.

Much as Gamut behaves erratically through different stages of the novel, sometimes other characters unpredictably sympathize with the psalmodist's emotional struggles. These stand as perfect moments for Cooper to ridicule Gamut's dramatic emotionality, but he fails to do so. Consider a moment in which Gamut becomes depressed at the state of humanity and sings therapeutically during a moment of respite (566). Comedy arises in that, due to a nearby waterfall, nobody can hear the singing—not even Gamut himself. The situation falls in line with the anxieties of books causing too much introspection, in that Gamut is so internally consumed that he cannot even interpret the noises of his surrounding environment. Other members of the group could have easily joined in on the joke and mocked Gamut for his blindness. Instead, Heyward remarks "Poor fellow! His voice is too feeble to be heard amid the din of the falls. Besides, the cavern will prove his friend. Let him indulge in his passion, since it may be done without hazard" (566).

Why does Heyward not take this opportunity to criticize Gamut, and therefore further Cooper's ideological agenda? Nuances like these remind readers that Gamut is not meant to be completely ostracized or despised, but rather to be pitied. If Cooper were strictly adhering to the guidelines of a "paternal apprenticeship system," there would be no room or reason for Gamut to experience any sort of sympathy; he would learn only through mimicking constant acts of masculine wisdom. Daniel Clay, another scholar of *The Last of the Mohicans*, explains that

Cooper does in fact concede that Gamut is a talented person, but believes the talent itself is flawed due to feminization of knowledge (Clay 126). There is a gap between Cooper's intended ideology—at least in Romero's influential account—and how Gamut is actually educated within these moments. The empathy characters continually extend to him, primarily during comedic moments of failure, reaffirms the power of education through maternal care.

This contradicts the heated discussion between Hawk-eye and Gamut that arises later on in the novel, in which education and reading are analyzed:

“Name chapter and verse; in which of the holy books do you find language to support you?” [says Gamut]. “Book,” repeated Hawk-Eye, with a singular and ill-concealed disdain; “do you take me for a whimpering boy, at the apron string of one of your old gals; and this good rifle on my knee... Book! What have such as I, who am a warrior of the wilderness, though a man without a cross, to do with books! I never read but in one, and the words that are written are too simple and too plain to need much schooling; though I may boast that of forty long and hard working years.” (604)

Hawk-eye's diatribe so clearly explains the reasons behind Cooper's mission to change Gamut: his dedication to the Bible limits him from the vast and sincere learning opportunities offered in the great outdoors. Hawk-eye is the archetype of Cooper's desired masculinity, and explains here that he became this way by *avoiding* a classical education. He is to teach Gamut how to be serious and not effeminate and funny like in his current state. The problem is that much of this teaching ironically emulates maternal styles of learning, exactly opposite of what Cooper intended to accomplish.

Disguises and Dress Up

Perhaps some of the most fascinating portions of the novel occur when various characters appear wearing bizarrely elaborate costumes. In addition to the comedic mishaps they produce, these scenes represent a reversal where the other men unexpectedly end up emulating Gamut's

creative spirit. This “flip of the script” means that Gamut is no longer learning from masculine identities like Hawk-eye, but that the others are now embodying Gamut’s performative actions. This distances Cooper even further from his goal of modeling Gamut into the ideal man through the “paternal apprenticeship system.”

In addition to his musicality, Gamut is also depicted as being an all-around performer. It feels natural for Cooper to extrapolate Gamut’s singing abilities to him being a thoroughly theatrical person— drama is a cornerstone of classical education and, therefore, serves as another element to critique. Scholars have many hypotheses behind why Cooper may have chosen to inject this bizarre motif of dress-up, like serving as a method to bring humanity even closer to nature. “These humans in animal disguise,” writes Lindsey Claire Smith, “are virtually the only animals present in the novel, making the human/environment bond all the more pointed in the transmission of the plot” (Smith 534). Smith’s reading aligns with Cooper’s ultimate mission of bringing humanity closer to the outdoors and that specific realm of learning. Gamut’s relationship to acting, much like singing, oscillates throughout the book, but rather improbably becomes central to the survival of the other characters in these moments.

The first time Gamut appears in costume and showcases his acting chops, it feels more like a child playing dress-up than a convincing disguise:

“A ragged calico mantle half encircled his body, while his nether garment was composed of an ordinary shirt... His legs were bare, and sadly cut and torn by briars... Altogether, the appearance of the individual was forlorn and miserable. The merriment of Hawk-eye was not easily appeased. Without ceremony, and with a rough hand, he twirled the supple Gamut around on his heel, and more than once affirmed that the Hurons had done themselves great credit in the fashion of his costume.” (727)

Hawk-eye’s joke should match the reader’s reaction— Gamut is clearly fooling no one but himself with this amateurish get-up. This moment, in addition to the many of the other characters

donning outlandish costumes, can feel uncomfortable and forced at first. But costuming is another way of obtaining new experiences considering Cooper's interest in challenging his characters and rebuilding their values through the journey. David Mazel suggests that "category crisis" is at play, where characters are facing "a breakdown in the very structures by the means of which nature and culture have been demarcated in the first place" (Smith 535). Smith adds to Mazel's outlook by suggesting that costuming strips characters of any stability and causes them to question their own identity and relations to others (Smith 535).

This form of education, by dressing up as others, literally represents the converse of "men teaching men," but rather is another introspective act—coded as feminine— associated with classic education. Much like characters empathize with Gamut throughout the novel, they are learning from other identities by shedding their own and taking on other personas. Cultivating one's capacity for empathy through introspection are fundamental elements of traditional education, not Cooper's paternal apprenticeship. Hawk-eye, Heyward, Gamut—every man who dons a disguise in these later chapter is therefore partaking in a very abstract, creative way of learning, explained by concepts like the aforementioned "category crisis."

One of the most farcical moments of disguises is when Hawk-eye, dressed up in an mysteriously convincing bear costume, discovers Gamut alone in the woods:

The bear shook his shaggy sides, and then a well-known voice replied—"Put up the tooting we'pon, and teach your throat modesty. Five words of plain and comprehensible English, are worth, just now, an hour of squalling." "What art thou?" demanded David, utterly disqualified to pursue his original intention, and nearly gasping for breath. (782)

Hawk-eye has abandoned his bare-bones mentality by wearing this elaborate artifice and acting so convincingly. What started off as Gamut putting on makeshift Native dress has led into a series gradually more complex costumes, climaxing at this absurd moment between Hawk-eye

and Gamut. Hawk-eye no longer acts in his usually composed, prophetic manner, but becomes so enveloped in this bear disguise that he truly exemplifies every aspect of this creature. Established structures of men teaching men have been subverted in the fantastical world of masquerades, where gender and even species are readily transgressed. When Hawk-eye asks Gamut to lead him to Heyward, Gamut quips back “The task will be difficult, though I greatly fear your presence would rather increase than mitigate his unhappy fortunes” (782). Logical behavior, for the first time, rests in Gamut’s dialogue, while Hawk-eye continues performing by choosing not to break character. The destruction of order brought on by role play completely destabilizes Cooper’s systems of masculine apprenticeship for a much more creative, genderless series of discoveries.

At the end of *The Last of the Mohicans*, Gamut reflects on how he has changed during this whole ordeal: “Now, that I have journeyed far, and sojourned much, in good and evil, with the maiden ye seek; and, though not a man of war, with my loins girded and my sword sharpened, yet would I gladly strike a blow in her behalf” (850). These declarations satisfy Cooper’s goal of Gamut leaving behind his meek identity for a masculine dominance, embodied here by giving up pacifism for violence. One could argue that this epiphany feels unnatural or premature for Gamut, resulting from Cooper adhering to his notions of the expected arc for this character. Nevertheless, the manner in which Gamut arrived at this realization is full of irony and conflicting messages. Cooper ardently believes in men teaching other men as the superior way of learning, so much so that he spends significant sections of the text using humor to lambast Gamut and other characters for heavily subscribing to the effeminate structure of classical education. As this chapter displayed, the boundaries between different methods of learning are often intermixed and muddy. *The Last of the Mohicans* does find Gamut as a different person in

the end of the novel, but the means of getting there are much more complicated than what Cooper hoped to depict. Humor was intended to chastise men in this novel who defy the ideal of hands-on learning; instead, it inadvertently champions characters who play and perform, ultimately undermining Cooper's education of Gamut.

Conclusion: Prioritizing Comicality

Comedy is not always about getting laughs. The meaning behind literary humor often reaches past the facades of snappy jokes, eccentric characters and silly situations. Comedy, above all, *defies* norms and *questions* the structures of reality. The best comedy gives you pause, thinking: why did I find this entertaining? Did it address a social issue in a particularly clever way? Or perhaps, did humor make you think about something through a new lens? These are the questions that unite the preceding chapters' inquiry into the unstable function of humor in *Moby-Dick*, *Ruth Hall*, and *The Last of the Mohicans*. This thesis, in its early stages, first focused on proving that these texts and 19th c. American literature in general do contain humorous components. However, it quickly became apparent that the comedy in each novel contended with deeply complicated issues including race, gender, and sexuality. Such moments in the texts are nowhere near perfect— many of them, as shown, are inherently problematic— but they catch our attention and challenge us to think about systems of power imbedded in comedy itself.

Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai's "Comedy Has Issues" is once more useful in illustrating this phenomenon:

Getting how comedy has the power to disturb without moralizing for or against it is key to getting the trouble of the comedic. It's one thing to grin at a boss, a baby, a cat picture, or a shot of some drunk who might on another day be you, and it's another thing to hit an unexpected edge

in proximity to what felt innocuous. It's not a spectrum; there's no continuum between the cute and the intractable, between the unintended pleasure and the sudden appearance of an uncomfortable joke that seems to write itself, thanks to the autonomy of mind, the conventions of culture, or plain old aggression. Maybe the fantasy of a spectrum alleviates the anxiety at the boundary where comedy enmeshes with all its others. (Berlant & Ngai 248)

This “edge” between “innocuous[ness] and the power to disturb” is very applicable to these texts. At one point in *Moby-Dick*, for example, a hilarious interaction that may feel so progressively queer then quickly dissipates into a uncomfortable moment with a xenophobic twinge. Or perhaps you find yourself giggling at Gamut's awkwardness before realizing how Cooper does, at times, treat him so cruelly. Both examples illustrate the ephemeral nature of comedy, with its effects shifting so rapidly through each changing context. However, we must embrace this unruliness instead of shying away from it; studying comedy within literature demonstrates how authors deftly use this tool in providing social, political, and economic commentaries.

We witnessed first-hand comedy's chameleonic capabilities in *Moby-Dick*. The freewheeling and swashbuckling characters engage in surprising and amusing behavior on the *Pequod*. But taking a step back to appreciate the close quarters of the boat and marked camaraderie of the shipmates merits a queerer reading of Ishmael's time on the high seas. I do believe, based on my research of *Moby-Dick*, that Melville was actively thinking about intimate male relationships and racial dynamics within this story. The heteronormative restrictions of this time do limit how explicitly Melville could contend with queer interactions. Nevertheless, his writing does radically approach male to male relationships in a profound and provocative manner.

Less compelling, however, is Melville's perpetuation of racialized power structures. His advocacy for sexual liberation does not resonate with his treatment of race relations in *Moby-Dick*. I encountered this reoccurring, almost systematic pattern between queerness and race by setting out to analyze the humor within these novels. Discovering motifs like this one in *Moby-Dick* reaffirms the power of studying comedy and its status in literature. We might believe that a comedic interaction is serving a straightforward purpose, when in reality the situation is really contending with weighty, ambivalent topics like sexuality and racism.

Ruth Hall's documentation of the domestic sphere seems worlds away from the hyper-masculinity featured throughout *Moby-Dick*; and yet, both books convene at humor about gender roles of the 19th century. Everything about *Ruth Hall* is designed to set up comedic situations, from the larger-than-life characters to the witty banter included in the succinct chapters. And, once again, we witness the versatility of humor with Fern's tactful crafting of different comedic scenarios. Awful people like Dr. Hall are so crude that, even though he treats Ruth abysmally, one can only chuckle at the farcicality. Laughing feels less guilty once Ruth gains her fiscal footing and rebukes various men with her sharp wittiness.

Attaching Ruth's recovery to capitalist success is one of the most intriguing elements in Fern's writing. Scholar Julie Wilhelm views *Ruth Hall* as a "working-class critique of industrial capitalism" (Wilhelm 215); I am not so sure if I agree. Fern certainly chides greedy characters like Hyacinth, but unrelenting industriousness and upward mobility reinforces central tenets of industrial capitalism. The novel's biting satire creates the impression of a cutting critique, but Fern's humor can be seen as supporting the very system many have supposed she opposed.

Lastly, deciphering the meaning of comedic elements within *The Last of the Mohicans* turned out to be quite a rigorous task. Cooper's extraordinarily flowery diction is challenging to

interpret by itself, let alone determining how a specific scene's comedy functions. Clarity came through the form of Gamut—a literary gift to the canon with his peculiar and delightful eccentricities. He sticks out like a sore thumb in the world he inhabits as well as, more generally, from Cooper's usual breed of characters. His genuine benevolence and bookish interests are charming, but to Cooper, Gamut embodies everything wrong about American values in education.

Humor in *The Last of the Mohicans*, in some ways, operates in the most direct manner within these three novels. Cooper wants to showcase the dangers of deeply committing oneself to academic endeavors and ignoring the lessons to be learned in the natural world. The strangest part about this, though, is how his work gets caught up in an ironic web where characters who are supposed to be learning by the “paternal apprenticeship system” end up acquiring knowledge by more traditional, “feminine” methods. This paradox shows humor's volatile side: the exact opposite of what Cooper meant to convey in Gamut occurred. Many more alternative explanations like this one, I am sure, can be found throughout the rest of Cooper's writing and other novelists of the era.

In closing, I ardently recommend prioritizing comedic scholarship in literature. Sure, there is much to interpret in what Melville really meant by “Call me Ishmael” (1). But moving past the recognized symbols of 19th c. American literature into the realm of comedy is inexplicably rewarding; it's funny how it just works.

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