「你到底相信誰？你的眼睛？還是我的話？」：
從齊傑克觀點重讀梅爾維爾的失能主體

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摘 要

不少失能研究的學者認為赫爾曼·梅爾維爾對失能角色亞哈之再現已多有貢獻，但對其描繪有過度本質化及化約的傾向。筆者認為可使用齊傑克的象徵層理論對之做出更進一步的研究。齊傑克指出已奠定的主體概念中，充滿了象徵層編織的多重謊言，由此可見亞哈看似靜態的截肢形象其實尚有可討論之處。建立在學者大衛·米其爾和樂絲瑪莉·格蘭湯生的探討之上，可更深化探究史巴克和史達等船員如何對失能者產生偏見，和亞哈本人又是如何無法自制地被這種偏見左右。而關於截肢角色的典型形象，在這裡齊傑克象徵層假面號令的概念，可作為一有意義的架構，幫助我們深化對於失能主體與關於失能的偏頗論述間衝突的分析，這些分析過去失能研究學者雖已展開卻未完成。從齊傑克的觀點來看，轉變成為失能主體，置亞哈於巨大的磨難中，因為他不只在身體上有了創傷，同時在象徵層則是船長的位置上受到威脅。在這樣的狀況下，大寫他深具影響力但卻固執不變的特性，因此這必須是一個探討的重點。就大寫他者而言，齊傑克象徵身份的理論讓我們透視象徵層建構物固執而盲目的特性，那有助於我們看清亞哈和船員間的衝突，也就是被象徵層排斥的失能主體及受到象徵層掌控的一般主體間的對立。當脆弱的象徵層謊言被揭穿，我們當可了解現實與象徵層間的不一致性。

關鍵詞：象徵身份、齊傑克、失能、亞哈、象徵層假面號令

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“Whom do you believe, your eyes or my words?”: Re-Reading Disabled Subject in Melville from a Žižekian Perspective

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Abstract

Some proponents of disability studies consider Herman Melville’s portrayal of the disabled character of Ahab as essentializing and reductive. Despite the contribution that scholars of disability studies have made to the investigation of Melville’s representation of the maimed captain, I would argue that one can expand the discussion by drawing on Slavoj Žižek’s theory on the symbolic. Following Žižek’s criticism on the symbolic fabrication of manifold lies about the established notion of the subject, there are much more to be found concerning Ahab’s seemingly static image of amputation. Building on the discussions of David Mitchell and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, one can explore how such crewmates as Starbuck and Stubb become bigoted about the disabled, as well as how Ahab himself is helplessly influenced by this bigotry. As for the stereotype image of the amputated man, Slavoj Žižek’s notion of the symbolic mask-mandate serves as a meaningful framework to help us deepen the analysis of the conflict between the disabled subject and the bigoted discourse of disability, which has been done but not yet finished by proponents of disability studies. From a Žižekian perspective, becoming a disabled subject puts Ahab in great affliction, since he is not only wounded physically, but is threatened symbolically in terms of his position as captain. The influential but fixed nature of the big Other should therefore be discussed. In terms of the big Other, Žižek’s theory of symbolic identity lets us see through the rigid and blind nature of symbolic construction, and therefore helps us understand the conflicts between Ahab, the disabled subject excluded from the symbolic, and his crewmen, the abled subjects subordinated to the symbolic. After uncovering the weakness of the symbolic lies, one will understand the incongruity between reality and the symbolic discourse.

Keywords: symbolic identity, Žižek, disability, Ahab, symbolic mask-mandate

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"Whom do you believe, your eyes or my words?":
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Introduction

Some proponents of disability studies consider Herman Melville’s portrayal of disabled characters as negative and flat. Looking at this dysfunctional old man with incurable psychic trauma, they directly connect Ahab’s disability to the demonstration of the dark, vicious side of humanity. Different from other kinds of subject, the disabled subject illustrates “only the static product of amputation” (Otter 13). Despite the contribution that scholars of disability studies have made to the investigation of Melville’s representation of the maimed captain, I would argue that one can expand the discussion by drawing on Slavoj Žižek’s theory on the symbolic. Besides ascertaining that Ahab demonstrates a static product of amputation, there are still more aspects to be explored, such as how crewmates, Starbuck and Stubb, become bigoted about the disabled, and how Ahab himself is helplessly influenced by this bigotry. At this point, Slavoj Žižek’s notion of the symbolic mask-mandate serves as a meaningful framework to help us analyze the conflict between the disabled subject and the bigoted discourse of disability. From a Žižekian perspective, becoming a disabled subject puts Ahab in great affliction, since he is not wounded only physically, but is threatened symbolically in terms of his position as captain. The influential but fixed nature of the big Other should therefore be incorporated into the discussion on the subject of the maimed captain. In terms of the big Other, Žižek’s theory of symbolic identity let us see through the rigid and blind nature of symbolic construction, and therefore help us understand the conflicts between Ahab, the disabled subject excluded from the symbolic, and his crewmen, the abled subjects subordinated to the symbolic. After uncovering the weakness of the symbolic lies, one will understand the incongruity between reality and the symbolic discourse.

Disability Studies: Ahab as Evil Captain

Not a few proponents of disability studies find that Herman Melville’s portrayal of disabled characters is basically essentializing and reductive. Such a disabled characters as Ahab is depicted either as evil and menacing to others (Garland-Thomson, Extraordinary Bodies 36), or associated with negative terms and punished by the logic of the story (Shakespeare and Watson 545). As is put by David Mitchell, “Ahab’s missing leg debases his physical and psychological person” (360) and Melville has emphasized that “the primary use of physiognomic interpretations in the nineteenth century was to theorize a distinct visage of criminality and depraved humanity” (362). In one word, “the literary disablement of fictional bodies represented a tactile device for quickly individuating a character within a complex social network of relations” (Mitchell 362). Furthermore, Rosemarie

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1 I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers who help me to revise and improve this paper. Their suggestions have been tremendously helpful to make the paper more comprehensive.
Garland-Thomson regards Ahab as “the quintessential disabled figure in American literature” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 44), representing “the incomplete, unbounded, compromised, and subjected body susceptible to external forces: property badly managed, a fortress inadequately defended, a self helplessly violated” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 45). As a result, the exterior shape of Ahab’s body reductively corresponds to the interior character of his personality, since “the outer mark of his difference is his ivory leg, and the inner manifestation is his monomaniacal fury” (Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies* 45).

Thus, Samuel Otter notices that some proponents of disability studies assert that Melville underscores disability “as signifying moral or spiritual deformity or psychic distress” (10). That is, when Melville shows that “[d]isability” is a crucial part of his fascination with how meanings are invested in and extracted from human bodies” (Otter 10), he artfully employs the vehicle of literary work to reveal what every amputated man is to face in the nineteenth century—when his body is no longer perfect and intact, all connotations of inferiority are attributed to him. More specifically, Samuel Otter’s refusal to align Ahab’s disability with his radical personality exposes his own bigotry on disability, that is, the fact that disability has to be linked to negative qualities. Contending that one should not presuppose the physical transformation into the disabled as the origin of all kinds of gruesome trait (Otter 14), Otter’s strategy is to dissociate Ahab’s psychic development from the disabled accident. He resists the tendency to link Ahab’s physical trauma to his tempestuous and distorted personality, and thus criticizes the established viewpoint that Ahab’s spasmodic and revengeful character results from his incurable malady of leglessness. In so doing, he makes an attempt to prove that Ahab’s unstable character and his plan of killing Moby Dick already exist before he turns into a disabled captain.

It is hence observed that the character of Ahab demonstrates no more than a static identity (Samson 59) yielded from having a prosthetic leg, which makes him stand for the “demonic cripple” (Otter 13). Instead of a self-made man, Ahab is “a whale-made man,” with his personality being entirely determined by the injury caused by the whale, and “his disabled body testifies to the self’s physical vulnerability” (Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies* 45). These observations aim at pointing out that for the disabled, personality and capability are inevitably degraded due to one’s corporeal flaw.

In fact, I would argue that after studying what have been found by such scholars of disability studies as Mitchell, Garland-Thomson, and Otter, one should further look into the formation of the bigotry against the disabled. For instance, Otter denies the link between Ahab’s loathsome temper and his disabled body, which nonetheless betrays the bigotry that the disabled subject can only be linked to potentials and possibilities that are presupposed to be positive. Wishing to remove any link between disability and manifold kind of personalities, it is apparent that Otter fails to accept disability in its diversity and indeterminacy. Without analyzing why, he refuses to tolerate the portrayal of the bad temper of the disabled, denying the fact that physical transformation may cause changes in the subject, and also that disability may create another form of subjectivity differing from that connected with the
norm of body.

From a Lacanian perspective, the bigotry against the disabled that is observed by Mitchell, Garland-Thomson, and Otter is formed on the level of the symbolic. I suggest we employ psychoanalytic theory to deepen the analysis done by these proponents of disability studies, so that one can uncover subtle aspects and intricate circumstances which lead to the symbolic discourse that segregates the disabled captain. Based on the stereotyped representation of the evil maimed man observed by scholars of disability studies, one can probe into the entangled hardships faced by the disabled captain in psychological aspect. We should attempt to unravel the far-reaching influence of the symbolic, in order to demonstrate that the vicious personality of Ahab is formed under the misleading lies of the big Other. I should first discuss the nature of hollowness of symbolic discourse with Lacan’s theory. Then, I will draw on Žižek’s theory of symbolic identity to further demonstrate the ridiculous but fixed nature of symbolic construction.

The Hollowness of the Symbolic

In Lacan’s theory, the symbolic law efficaciously influences the subject’s perspective of others, since it is a system that refers to social and cultural habits and thinking, being “inseparable from discourse in so far as it implies rules, taboos and beliefs which must be formulated” (Lemaire 56). It is also “something more than life, something like a vow, a pact” (Lemaire 55). Therefore, to say that the subject enters the symbolic means he acquires not only language, but also social and cultural values, philosophical, religious, or other systems of thought. However, it should be noted that as an order of values the symbolic differs from all reality (Lemaire 55), since it is not an order of material substances in reality, but one of signifiers. It operates in the form of signification, which hinges on the coherence of relations between signifiers (Lemaire 55). The big Other functions as a framework of references, enabling the interpretation of meaning to explain things the subject encounters in life (Žižek, How To 10).

Hence, the network of references provided by the symbolic should not be viewed as a reliable form of meaning. From a Lacanian perspective, there is a hollow character of the symbolic, which means that it is an order of signifiers instead of concrete substance. Differing from Saussure, who takes the signified as the primary, determinate factor, Lacan stresses the signifier as primary. Lacan writes: “[E]very real signifier is, as such, a signifier that signifies nothing... The more the signifier

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2 The symbolic involves the fact that the subject has to enter the father’s law of the symbolic after he overcomes the Oedipus complex. The symbolic is a law that governs not only the rules of language, but also the logic of mathematics, and all kinds of societal structure that is manifested by “the guise of marriage ties and kinship relationships” (Muller and Richardson 77). Here the subject recognizes the Name-of-the-Father, and therefore Lacan writes that “it is in the name of the father that we must recognize the basis of the symbolic function which, since the dawn of historical time, has identified his person with the figure of the law” (Écrits 66). The father that carries the function of the law is not a real personage, but the symbolic father who embodies rules in the symbolic order, regulating what the subject can and cannot do. Most importantly, this symbolic law is “all-pervasive,” accompanying the subject throughout his life, offering him “both servitude and grandeur” (Muller and Richardson 78).
signifies nothing, the more indestructible it is” (Seminar III 185). Hence, according to the explanation given by Lacan here, the signifier is hollowness without substance. Since it represents the signified in a contingent way, it means that it does not signify anything at all. The only reason that the signifier represents a particular signified is no reason. Insofar as the link between the signifier and the signified is fragile, the signifier in fact signifies nothing besides nothingness.

As one can see, the hollowness of the big Other is tellingly demonstrated in Lacan’s seminar on “The Purloined Letter.” In this seminar Lacan employs the fiction of Edgar Allan Poe to discuss how the signifying chain operates. According to Lacan’s analysis, there are four main characters in the short story of “The Purloined Letter” (1844)—the King, the Queen, the Minister, and the last one, the letter (Seminar II 196). What forms the pivot of the story is the retrieval of a letter, which is addressed to the Queen but stolen. In his analysis Lacan shows how the void big Other is related to the subject in a subtle way. The three important characters listed by Lacan are intricately implicated in the activities revolving around the letter. The letter is read as a signifier that possesses a highly determinant power, through which Lacan explains “the insistence of the signifying chain and the determination of the subject by the signifier” (Homer 46). The letter draws the characters to it like a magnet and engenders a signifying chain. Each character is drawn into the pursuit of it, either obtaining or losing it. What is most prominent is not the content of the letter, but the position of it. The place where it is placed decides the subject’s relation to it.

Most importantly, Lacan tells us that the letter does not have the same meaning everywhere (Seminar II 198). For instance, when the letter is taken away from the Queen and is in the Minister’s pocket, it is no longer a love letter. It is less a document of personal feelings than a court exhibit if the King finds out the truth and sends the Queen to trial in front of the public. What Lacan is emphasizing here is that no matter into whose hand the letter is going to fall, as soon as it falls into different hands, the meaning of it is changed. As such, the uncertainty of meaning, and more prominently, the subject’s relation to the signifier, is expounded by Lacan:

Thus, the tale of The Purloined Letter signifies that there’s nothing in destiny, or causality, which can be defined as a function of existence. One can say that, when the characters get a hold of this letter, something gets a hold of them and carries them along and this something clearly has dominion over their individual idiosyncrasies. Whoever they might be, at this stage of the symbolic transformation of the letter, they will be defined solely by their position in relation to this radical subject . . . This position isn’t fixed. (Seminar II 196)

What works magnificently is the subject’s position in relation to the letter. The position of the

3 The Queen has had to put the letter on the table when the King enters unexpectedly. The Minister discovers the Queen’s uneasiness, and steals the letter away. Although he replaces the letter with another one looking identical, the Queen knows that it has been stolen by the Minister. She has the Prefect of Police to search the Minister’s place to find the stolen letter. No result is yielded, however. The detective, Dupin, is invited to help the Prefect of Police, and finds the letter in the most visible place.
subject is not fixed since the subject is in movement and multiple meanings are produced under such circumstances.

Moreover, Sarup points out that the letter “does not function as a unit of meaning,” as the signified, but “as that which produces certain effects,” as the signifier (172). It means that no meaning can ever be stabilized in itself. When meaning is produced, the subject is constituted by the symbolic order, because as the letter moves “it attracts different meanings to itself” and “mediates different kinds of power relationships and determines subjects in what they do and are” (Sarup 172-3).

Thus, Lacan mentions the absurdity caused by the subject’s overreliance on the symbolic. One obtains universal adherence to what we will simply call doctrine. . . you can make anyone endorse any element of the symbolic chain, at the whim of the symbol’s naked power when a certain personal meditation is missing. . .

That isn’t a witticism. Think about it--why don’t they find it? It is there. They have seen it. What did they see? A letter. They may even have opened it. But they didn’t recognize it. (Seminar II 201)

Lacan argues sarcastically that the police, as the representatives of legitimate power, are trained to follow nothing but the symbol. Therefore, what the police can recognize is the symbolic body of the letter instead of the real letter lying in the room. The symbolic body of letter that they know should be one with “a red seal and a certain address” (Seminar II 201). The Queen’s love letter lacks these two elements and is thus missed by the police. Lacan therefore concludes that they in fact see it with their eyes but they just cannot recognize it.

The Bizarre logic of the Symbolic Mask-mandate

After Lacan laying down the foundation of the theory of the symbolic, Žižek clarifies and elaborates the theory of psychoanalysis by employing a broad range of examples in terms of jokes, cultural events, and literary works. Although in general he discusses the theory of psychoanalysis in line with Lacan, Žižek “himself performs a similar, sectarian split from the main body of Lacanian theory and practice” (Wood 227) as Lacan does with Freud. Drawing on Lacan’s notions of the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real, Žižek further “makes significant contributions to psychoanalytic thought . . . through the deployment of new concepts such as interpassivity, the

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4 Whether it be the meaning of the content of the letter, or of the subject, it is bound to involve the subject’s relation to the signifier.

5 The big Other can therefore be said to be a hollow center that depends on the co-operation of the subject. It has the paradoxical character of being both present and absent, meaning that it is at once everywhere and nowhere. Lacan writes: It is “disguised in a kind of presence-absence. There it is, but it isn’t there, it only has its own value in relation to everything it threatens, to everything it violates” (Seminar II 198). To the King who is not aware of the secret love affair between the duke and the Queen, nothing happens at all. To the Queen, who is afraid that her secret may be revealed, the existence of the letter is very threatening.

6 It is known that Lacan interprets Freudian theory by “reinventing” it (Wood 227). The difference between Lacan and Freud is not the main focus of this paper, and the discussion of it will thus not be provided.
conjunction of Lacan with the analysis of popular culture, political theory, Marx, German Idealism, and Enlightenment rationality” (Bryant 1). As a “committed Marxist” (Booker 780), Žižek compares Lacanian theory with the thinking of such philosophers as Hegel and Habermas from a leftist perspective. With his writing being known as “provocative” (Booker 780), critics sometimes doubt “if it is lacanian” (Depoortere 24) when looking at Žižek’s theory.

However, Žižek’s reinvigoration of Lacanian theory is still immensely helpful in shedding new lights on one’s understanding of psychoanalysis. He “focuses especially on Lacan’s later seminars and writings,” involving the “limits of symbolization” (Wood 19). In what follows it is going to be shown that Žižek “does not only deploys Lacanian concepts” but “develops them” (Wood 28). Due to the fact that Lacan never dwells on the hollowness of the symbolic by giving versatile examples of the subject within varied situation, it is necessary to probe into Žižek’s extension of the Lacanian big Other by looking into his discussion on its virtuality.

First and foremost, Žižek points out that the nature of the big Other is in fact one of virtuality. He writes: “In spite of all its grounding power, the big Other is fragile, insubstantial, properly virtual, in the sense that its status is that of a subjective presupposition. It exists only in so far as subjects act as if it exists” (How To 10). The system of law in the symbolic is not only comprised of everyone’s activity in the society, but is also depended on their participation. It is objective in its regulatory function, but to carry it out it needs subjective acting and knowing. It is a virtual set of rules that if without the support of the subject’s activity, it cannot be sustained at all (Žižek, How To 11). An example of Žižek’s can illustrate this virtuality of the big Other. Usually when people are talking, they are used to mention an idea such as “what if other people think in this or that way.” Whenever others’ opinion is referred to, however, “it is never only a matter of what I, you, or other individuals think, but also of what the impersonal ‘one’ thinks” (Žižek, How To 11). The impersonal “one” that does not exist at all indeed exists in everyone’s context when he considers probable opinions. This persistent but hollow presence in the person is the fragile, virtual Other.7

To further explicate Žižek’s notion of the virtual Other, I suggest we look at his discussion of “the symbolic mask-mandate” (The Ticklish Subject 323). It points out the discrepancy between words, which function on the level of the symbolic, and reality, which we experience in our life. His analysis starts with the bizarre logic of the question—“Whom do you believe, your eyes or my words?” (The Ticklish Subject 323)—in a Marx Brothers’ film. This question exposes the helplessness of the person who gets caught in a lie, and unreasonably asks the person who finds what he has done to believe his words, instead of blaming him for what he has done. In other words, to resort to words is to seek help

7 The example of grammatical rule can also explains how the big Other exists virtually. Žižek explains that one has first to learn complicated grammatical rules and memorize them. Later, when the subject is immersed in the rules, there are two levels of using it. The first one is that the subject follows the rules blindly, but when he reflects on it sometimes he may be partially aware of it; the second one is that he follows the rules in ignorance. Therefore, there are rules that the subject knows, “but must not be seen to know of—dirty or obscene innuendos that one passes over in silence in order to keep up the proper appearances” (Žižek, How To 9).
from the symbolic, to construct a lie which lets one ignore the reality. Žižek writes: “This apparently absurd logic expresses perfectly the functioning of the symbolic order, in which the symbolic mask-mandate matters more than the direct reality of the individual who wears this mask and/or assumes this mandate” (*The Ticklish Subject* 323). It is as if the mask made of words becomes a mandate which confuses the subject and hypnotizes him, so that he sees the reality but he does not comprehend it.

Hence, Žižek continues the discussion of the symbolic mask-mandate by telling the story of an elderly lady, which illustrates how the subject can be profoundly deceived or constrained by symbolic construction. In Slovenia, there was an elderly lady who believed the street number of her house induced bad luck. During an election campaign, she asked the candidate to change the number, which is 23. She told the candidate that it is necessary to do so because this number was assigned during the previous administrative reorganization, and it has since then brought her misfortunes such as burglars breaking in and being annoyed by neighbors. After listening, the candidate was amazed and suggested that she could change it by herself, adding either a letter or number after 23 to make it 23A or 231. The funny thing is that the elderly lady answered that she has tried and changed it, but “it didn’t work” (Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* 326) and she believed it will work if it is changed by the administrative institution.

One should therefore note the fathomless power of the symbolic when the old lady shows such incredibly firm belief in the effect of the administrative institution’s act. Žižek explains this power by pointing out that the “it,” the old lady’s unfortunate situation, is linked by her to the symbolic institution of the administrative unit responsible for the street number. Thereby she refuses to solve the problem in terms of the direct reality, such as reinforcing burglar alarms or negotiating with neighbors. Ridiculously, she has to take the route of the symbolic, believing that “you can’t cheat it” (Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* 326). The “‘it’ which cannot be duped in this way is the Lacanian big Other, the symbolic institution” (Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* 326) that we should understand.

Interestingly, Žižek analyzes this kind of blind and stubborn conviction as “symbolic efficiency” (*The Ticklish Subject* 380), which indicates that “the gap between reality and the order of its symbolic registration is crucial” (*The Ticklish Subject* 328). That is to say, each reality has its own symbolic registration which “explains” and then somehow distorts. For each situation, there is always a symbolic story which deals with it and determines how people perceive it. Because of the gap between reality and its symbolic registration, the bare fact witnessed by one’s eyes seems like non-existent, and

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8 Lacan analyzes the gap between reality and the symbolic doctrine from a similar perspective to Žižek, only with different wordings. Lacan uses the term “truth” in his discussion on *The Purloined Letter* to refer to Žižek’s meaning of reality, and the term “reality” to refer to Žižek’s meaning of the symbolic doctrine. Lacan analyzes that when the letter is put in an obvious place, the police who does not find the letter because the truth of its existence is hidden. It is due to the fact that to the police “the truth doesn’t matter” since “for them there is only reality, and that is why they do not find anything” (Lacan, *Seminar II* 202). Therefore, what is hidden is not the plain existence of the letter, but the truth of it because the eyes of the police are not willing to search for the truth. The fact of the letter’s existence provides no meaning to them and they cannot see it at all.
the registered description, order, or identity in the big Other overwhelmingly outweighs everything in the dimension of reality.

Last but not least, we should probe into Žižek’s notion of symbolic identity. After understanding that the hollowness and virtuality of the symbolic needs to be filled by the subject’s participation, it is important that we acknowledge that each of us is endowed with a symbolic identity. By the notion of symbolic identity Žižek aims to explain that on the symbolic level, the subject is given a social and symbolic identity which profoundly influences and determines his recognition of himself. He writes, “there is one level at which symbolic efficiency sets in, a level which determines my socio-symbolic position” (The Ticklish Subject 330). It is a pragmatic, fixed identity (Žižek, The Ticklish Subject 330), so that any attempt to change it would result in catastrophe. As it is going to be discussed, the story of Moby-Dick shows that Ahab loses such a pragmatic, fixed symbolic identity, and it puts him in great affliction. This is due to the fact that after the accident caused by Moby Dick, Ahab’s fake leg has altered his symbolic identity of captain. The symbolic identity of captain has finely registered Ahab in the signifying chain before; now, however, he is dragged away from this fixed symbolic identity and becomes unanchored in the big Other. Therefore, for Ahab, “the terrible wound he suffered,” is a wound not “simply physical,” “but a wound precisely to his authoritative position as captain” (Peretz 44). Formerly the omnipotent captain of the Pequod, Ahab is now burdened with the name of “the hunchbacked skipper” (418). Although symbolic identity is a “symbolic registration” that is “ultimately contingent” (Žižek, The Ticklish Subject 328), it is still a powerful identity, and the loss of which can uproot the subject’s relation to the three orders.

The Madman’s Loss of Symbolic Identity

To illustrate the catastrophic consequence of losing one’s symbolic identity, we should look at Žižek’s discussion of the joke of the madman. The joke explains the fact that when one feels insecure due to the loss of the registered identity in the symbolic, he will feel excluded from the big other and go crazy. In the joke, there is a madman who thinks he is a grain of corn; as the story goes on, however, he is cured by the doctor. When supposedly he is now “normal” and can participate in the social order properly, it turns out that his madness suddenly affects him again. He returns to tell the doctor that he feels like a grain of corn again. He does not dare to go out, since if he meets a hen on the road, he is afraid that he might be eaten. The doctor is astonished since he has affirmed before that the patient is cured and therefore he should know that he is a human being and cannot be swallowed by a tiny hen. The doctor is perplexed and asks him why he forgets that he is a human.

As a matter of fact, the key of the joke lies in the madman’s answer to the doctor’s question. He says: “Yes, I know I’m no longer a grain of corn, but does the hen?” (Žižek, The Ticklish Subject 326) The madman’s worry about the hen uncovers that the psychological problem of madness is not restricted to the subject’s individual world. It is intimately bound to the socio-symbolic reign, which is represented by the hen, the big Other who always stays there and keeps an eye on the subject. Therefore, the madman’s joke demonstrates the fixed nature of symbolic identity. At this point, Žižek
explains:

The poor madman who met a hen adopted the attitude of ‘I know very well that I am a man, but . . . [does the big Other know it?]’—in short, he believed that the change in identity had not yet been registered by the big Other, that for the big Other he was still a grain of corn. (The Ticklish Subject 329)

Apparently, symbolic identity is influential. When the madman is not confident enough in the big Other, his madness cannot be cured. It does not count when he is informed that he is a man, since it counts only when the big Other, the hen, recognizes that he is man. This shows that symbolic identity is of a rigid, rooted nature which significantly affected the subject. As it is going to be illustrated in below, Ahab faces the same problem as the madman. Ahab knows by his heart that he is potent enough as a captain for no doubt, but he is anxious that the big Other, represented by other people in the whaling industry, deny his capability. Since Ahab becomes amputated, his stable symbolic identity of captain which functions well in the past is uprooted. His fragmented body is not recognized, approved by the symbolic norm, especially that of the law of whaling which demands a strong, wholesome captain.

Above we have examined the hollow but influential nature of the symbolic. The absurdity underlying both Žižek’s story of the old lady and the question “Whom do you believe, your eyes or my words?” shows that the symbolic is a construct which does not represent reality honestly and is therefore amount to lies. To follow it blindly would be dangerous. The point that “the symbolic mask-mandate matters more than the direct reality” also indicates that the symbolic is only a fiction, which more conceals than reveals reality to the subject. Symbolic identity, however, is yielded from this fiction, and stiffly constricts the subject’s perspective.

In what follow we will look into the text of Moby-Dick, which interestingly illustrates Žižek’s analysis of the symbolic. In this nineteenth-century novel, Melville artfully demonstrates the power of the big Other by portraying a disabled captain who is distrusted by his crew. In this sea epic, the big Other is represented by the sailors and owners of the Pequod, the characters who have profound influence on the whaling industry. As is put by Garland-Thomson, “Herman Melville’s Ahab nevertheless suggests the problem of the body” (44) and “the disabled figure appears not as transformed, supple, or unique but as violated” (45). Also, it is mentioned above that Mitchell has pointed out how Ahab’s humanity has been debased due to the bodily error he has shown. If one puts Garland-Thomson’s and Mitchell’s discussions in terms of psychoanalysis, one will find that when the seamen look down on Ahab due to his fake leg, or say, his dismembered body, they let him feel that he is hopelessly excluded from the symbolic.9 Undoubtedly, such crewmen as Stubb and Starbuck are

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9 I argue that Ahab makes a psychotic escape from the big Other in order to deal with his fear and unease. Facing the new identity of the disabled captain enforced on him from the symbolic of whaling, Ahab tries to escape from it by hiding himself in delusions of the imaginary order. In terms of the relation between Ahab’s psychotic escape and the symbolic order, I would like to draw on Žižek’s remark on the transgression of the symbolic: “The symbolic Order is a given that can be effectively transgressed only if the subject pays the
restricted by the perspective of disability on the symbolic level, and are therefore “at the whim of the symbol’s naked power” (Lacan, *Seminar II* 201). We will explore how in this story of the monomaniac captain, his madness is caused by the exclusion from the symbolic. His lunacy is not simply the result of losing a leg, but the consequence of losing his symbolic identity. The conflict between reality and symbolic lies is worth a discussion.

**Stubb and the Trap of the Symbolic Lies of Disability**

In the sea story of the vengeful captain, the quintessence of disability underlying the portrayal of Ahab (Garland-Thomson 44) can be found in that fact that Melville poses Ahab’s physical trauma as a question, trying to provoke the reader to think more about the “mystery” (386) of his behavior, meaning his tempestuous character and his monomania for revenge. It is depicted that the people who know Ahab ashore cannot understand his change after the traumatic accident, and therefore trying to “muffle up the knowledge of this thing from others” (386). In fact, Melville himself notices the symbolic fiction of the career of being a sailor, uncovering how people weaved the story of whaling to delude young man to participate in the business of whale hunting. In “Etching of a Whaling Cruise,” Melville talks about the whaling business, revealing how the shipping agents usually “decoy” green hands to go whaling by addressing “handsome young fellows” on the street when “a few choice vacancies remain to be filled in certain crews of whalem en about to sail” (531). Melville writes that the agents “disabuse their minds of any unfavorable impressions” and then become “charmingly facetious and complimentary” (Melville, “Etching of” 531). The rupture between Ahab’s trauma of sailing and the idealistic discourse on sailing hence form an interesting inconformity. The discrepancy between the lies constructed on the symbolic level and the experience that one faces necessitates a discussion on the symbolic lies that is influential throughout the novel.

Hence, the incongruity between Ahab’s capability and others’ mistrust, namely reality and symbolic lies, soon catches the reader’s eye. We can first look at the reality that is related to Ahab, that is, his true capability. Ahab’s competence is clearly shown at the beginning of the book where Ahab, though losing a leg, is depicted as a man full of vitality. As Leon Howard remarks, Ahab is characterized by “agility” (qtd. in Otter 15) since there is not much obstacle in his movement, swift and virile. For example, when having “intolerable vivid dreams of the night,” Ahab “would burst from his state room” (174) and sometimes he “rushed from his room” (175). When being stimulated by the news that a whale is sighted, Ahab responds fast, “suddenly erecting himself” (264). Seeing the whale approaching, the sailors “slid to the deck” “like shooting star”, while Ahab “less dartingly, but still rapidly was dropped from his perch” (456). Countless details depicting his rapid movement are

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price of psychotic exclusion; so that on the one hand we have false imaginary resistance to the symbolic Norm and, on the other, psychotic breakdown, with the full acceptance of alienation in the symbolic Order (the goal of psychoanalytic treatment) as the only ‘realistic’ option” (*The Ticklish Subject* 262-3). Here, however, I would like to stay focused on the discussion of power of the symbolic and would not go into the analysis of Ahab’s psychotic phenomena. Ahab’s psychotic phenomena are discussed in another paper of mine.
provided throughout the book, all of which prove that he moves no less efficiently than others.

More notably, Ahab is proved to be able to hunt whales in Chapter 48, “The First Lowering.” He surprises Ishmael and other sailors when he, “standing erect in the stern” (187) in the small boat, rows with five strangers who suddenly show up. Going down to the small boat is a strenuous task and can easily get whalers killed, especially for one who lacks a leg. In opposition to everyone’s expectation, however, Ahab “sided the furthest to windward” and “was still ranging ahead of the other boats” (190). He is witnessed to be in control of his movement facilely, “with one arm, like a fencer’s, thrown half backward into the air, as if to counterbalance any tendency to trip,” and he “was seen steadily managing his steering oar as in a thousand boat lowering ere the White Whale had torn him” (190). This time Ahab returns and is disappointed because he does not find Moby Dick, but he proves how strong he is with one leg.

Nevertheless, one finds that the sailors on the Pequod still accuse Ahab of being impotent and weak, corresponding to what Žižek analyzes with the question “Whom do you believe, your eyes or my words?” The crewmen stubbornly endorse the symbolic lies of disability and refuse to trust what they see in Ahab. Interestingly, as is discussed above, Žižek reinforced the investigation of the symbolic discourse of disability achieved by scholars of disability studies. What one finds about the symbolic fabrication of the minority group of the disabled in Žižek’s analysis has been mentioned by two of the most prominent proponents of disability studies, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder. They point out that there is “the complexity of delineating disability as a symbolic space” (The Body 17), which means that multifarious symbolic meanings are ascribed to the category of disability according to discursive purpose. The categorization of disability, just as those of sexuality, gender, race, and other minorities, belongs to “a constructed category of discursive investment” (Mitchell and Snyder, Narrative Prosthesis 2). Mitchell and Snyder attempt to emphasize that the given category of disability is constructed historically and culturally instead of being naturally formed. Other categories such as sexuality, gender, and race are either explicitly or implicitly constructed according to the needs of each age. For instance, for the category of gender, the Victorian link femininity with hysteria. Similarly, the category of disability is historically and culturally constructed since the early time of Plato, who establishes the preference for the perfect, healthy body and thinks of individuals with physical impairment as ugly (Mitchell and Snyder, The Body 43). As is put by Martha Edwards, “given the Greek philosophical ideal of symmetry and balance, it is not surprising that physical handicaps usually had negative aesthetic consequences” (42). Plato highly values symmetry of human

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10 It is extraordinarily hard to hunt whales in the small boat. They use harpoons that are double-edged, but “more whales were lost than caught with this ‘double-flued iron’” (Mary Edwards 88). The whale would usually “turn around and smash the boat” (Mary Edwards 88) when it is harpooned, since its gigantic trunk and tail can break the small boat. If the whalers are lucky and not yet killed, they will be pulled by the whale with the harpoon as if on a sleigh ride. They would wait till the whale gets tired, and then put a lance into the whale’s lung. The fight is not over until the whale spouts blood, not white mist as usual, from its blowhole. Overall, handling the small boat needs strong, muscular power. In terms of the technique of hunting whale, Melville demonstrates with the story “forcefully clear” that “whaling was a brutal, nasty business” (Mary Edwards 88).
body and evaluates limping as a faultiness (Martha Edwards 43). Aristotle also depreciates the lack of balance shown by the disabled body.\textsuperscript{11} When it comes to Rousseau, the ideal of the natural man furthermore discriminates against the disabled body on the symbolic level. In his conceptualization of “one’s whole self with one” (28), he asserts the natural man with healthy body as one “in totality” and with “his own fullness” (114).\textsuperscript{12}

Hence, one has to look at the event of mockery which demonstrates clearly how the maimed captain’s competence is always in doubt when everyone is under the sway of the symbolic construct of the notion of disability. In this event, Stubb dreams of being kicked by Ahab’s ivory prosthetic leg, which implies the absurdity Stubb feels when having a disabled captain on aboard. After Stubb tells others about his dream, Ahab’s prosthetic leg has become the center of everyone’s joke on board.

Here Stubb tells Flask:

“You know the old man’s ivory leg, well I dreamed he kicked me with it . . . I somehow seemed to be thinking to myself, that after all, it was not much of an insult . . . ‘Why,’ thinks I, ‘. . . It’s not a real leg, only a false leg.’ . . . I was thinking to myself, ‘what’s his leg now, but a cane—a whalebone cane. Yes,’ thinks I, ‘it was only a playful cudgelling . . .’” (115)

What he tries to express is it is ridiculous to be oppressed by a demanding but physically impotent leader. The impotence of Ahab is shown by Stubb’s comment that “it’s not a real leg, only a false leg.” Stubb even compares the captain to a “broad footed farmer,” concluding that only a kick from the latter is “a devilish broad insult,” since the end of Ahab’s “foot part” is merely “a small sort of end” and the insult it causes is “whittled down to a point only” (115). Such a way of looking down on the “foot part” of the prosthetic leg reduces Ahab to a preposterous figure. Ahab is, above all, taken as “the hunchbacked skipper of some coasting smack” (418).

Therefore, the symbolic mask-mandate which attributes inferior ability to the disabled has gained the upper hand successfully. Even in reality Ahab’s movements are swift and efficient, to others who are tightly bound to the symbolic order of the whaling industry he is only a madman whose cry is like an “unearthly slogan” which “tore every other cry but his to shreds” (456). Namely, everyone doubts Ahab’s leadership simply because they refuse to trust a disabled man. Even the owners of the ship feel risky to count on him; it is narrated by Ishmael that the “joint-owners of the Pequod” would not think it is “wise for any maimed man to enter a whaleboat in the hunt” (197). Therefore, Ahab is not granted a small boat for hunting, since the “heads of the owners of the Pequod” would not agree to “apportion” (198) a boat to Ahab, let alone five extra men for that boat. As a result, he has to secretly hide five men in his cabin, who astound other crewmates as “five dusky phantoms that seemed fresh

\textsuperscript{11} Aristotle considers even defects worse than a hooked nose or snub as a form of excess and lack symmetry (Martha Edwards 43), which contribute to the ugly form of human body.

\textsuperscript{12} In another paper of mine, which has been presented in a conference, I have examined in detail how the notion of the perfect human body is rooted in Rousseau’s thinking on the noble savage and the disabled, unbalanced body is degraded.
formed out of air” (187). Most consequentially, Stubb’s skepticism about Ahab’s capability pinpoints how Ahab, the prosthetic captain, is distrusted. He explicitly disapproves of Ahab’s performance in a boat: “‘Who would have thought it, Flask!’ cried Stubb; ‘if I had but one leg you would not catch me in a boat, unless maybe to stop the plug-hole with my timber toe’” (197). In general, Ahab’s bold attempt at hunting the whale in person is viewed as an act that would “jeopardize” the captain’s life “in the active perils of the chase” (197). The discrepancy between reality and symbolic lies is evidently illustrated.

**Ahab’s Loss of the Symbolic Identity**

Facing the tremendous doubt coming from the big Other, Ahab cannot help but traps himself in self-doubt like the madman in the joke mentioned above. Both Melville’s emphatic portrayal of his ivory leg as well as Ahab’s complains about his fake leg make us understand that his identity crisis hinges upon the leg. For instance, it is described that Elijah talks about the rumor of “a parmacetti took the other” (87) leg off Ahab, and also that Ahab often walks back and forth on the deck with the bone leg. Losing the symbolic identity as captain, Ahab acknowledges that his authority at sea has been challenged. He never feels complete; the mutilation of his body has spread to his heart. The old symbolic identity of the captain no longer matches his newly maimed body, since it presupposes that to be a captain is to be intact physically.

We can see that Ahab is now burned with the wish to become a centipede, which represents the ideal model of the body of man, one with numerous vigorous leg. It can be found in the passage which describes that Ahab’s fascination with the idea of possessing a hundred legs should be analyzed:

Stand around me, men. Ye see an old man cut down to the stump; leaning on a shivered lance; propped up on a lonely foot. ‘Tis Ahab—his body’s part; but Ahab’s soul’s a centipede, that moves upon a hundred legs. I feel strained, half stranded, as ropes that tow dismasted frigates in a gale; and I may look so. (459)

His dream of being a centipede with countless legs runs counter to his real situation, which exposes his desire to have more legs than normal, not having less. His complaint concretizes the state of his fragmented body—cut down to the leg, leaning his whole body on a crutch made from lance, and being supported by one remaining foot. Evidently, the rigid symbolic norm of the integrity of the body frustrates him momentarily. He is like the madman in Žižek’s joke, who can never be confident enough to go out to meet the big Other, since the big Other never knows that he is still a man, strong and capable.

Furthermore, the fixed, symbolic identity of man is found in Ahab’s conversations with others throughout the book. For instance, there is a passage which reflects the irretrievability of the symbolic identity of captain. After his old ivory leg is broken, Ahab talks to the carpenter about the creation of legs when the latter is trying to make him a new ivory leg. Ahab sighs for the goodness of having two legs, saying to the carpenter, “so, now, here is only one distinct leg to the eye yet two to the soul”
Here Ahab obstinately clings to the symbolic identity of man that he once had, and upholds it as something invincible, calling it “inaccessible being”:

“But even with a broken bone, old Ahab is untouched; and I account no living bone of mine one jot more me, than this dead one that’s lost. Nor white whale, nor man, nor fiend, can so much as graze old Ahab in his own proper and inaccessible being” (458).

Therefore, although he has lost the leg for a long while and it is impossible to feel it again, he still feels pain in his leg sometimes, a phenomenon which comes close to phantom limb pain.13 There is also another example which illustrates the loss of the symbolic identity of the abled man. Ahab laments for the incurable pain of the wound: “Aye, blacksmith, it is the one; aye, man, it is unsmoothable; for though thou only see’st it here in my flesh, it has worked down into the bone of my skull—that is all wrinkles!” (403) The pain cannot be healed since it comes from the symbolic instead of reality. It is a phantom which follows the captain’s floating soul around the boundary of the symbolic. Again, on the second day of chasing Moby Dick, Ahab cries, “how this splinter gores me now” (458). All these instances reflect the fixed concept of the man that is based on the biased conception fathomlessly inscribed in the symbolic. So long as Ahab’s dream of becoming a centipede and his lament for the pain do not occur just once, it shows that he cannot let go of the symbolic notion of two legs.

Having lost the symbolic identity of the captain, Ahab never feels at ease to command others on the Pequod. It is therefore not surprising that he sometimes imagines that his cabin is like a grave, making him feel as if he is living in some deadly space: “It feels like going down into one’s tomb . . . for an old captain like me to be descending this narrow scuttle, to go to my grave-dug berth” (112). He also has to rely on pipe smoking to ease his pain, mental and physical, of losing a leg. Chapter 30, “The Pipe,” is devoted to depicting such tendencies. Ahab soliloquizes: “[T]his smoking no longer soothes. Oh, my pipe! Hard must it go with me if thy charm be gone! Here have I been unconsciously toiling, not pleasuring,—aye, and ignorantly smoking to windward all the while . . . ” (114) All these lead to the doubt of identity that Ahab expresses in the rhetorical question—“Is Ahab, Ahab?” (445). Asking if he is the same person he was, the once “unconquerable captain” (458) doubts not only his identity as captain, but also his identity of being a human. That is why he further asks—“Is it I, God, or

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13 What underscores Ahab’s obstinate thought about the perfect, complete body is the sickness of phantom limb pain. Phantom limb is “a term used to designate the sensation of the presence of an extremity following its amputation” (Jain). It is a concept that has been examined by Ambroise Pare, Rene Descartes, Aaron Lemos, Charles Bell. What the French surgeon, Ambroise Pare, describes a patient suffering from phantom limb pain in 1551 in terms reminding us of Ahab’s problem: “the patients who have, many months after cutting away of the leg, grievously complained that they still felt great pain of the leg so cut off” (qtd. in Jain). The patient’s counterfeit complaint about pain coming from the disappeared leg reflects that he deceives himself into thinking that his leg is still present. Dr. Jain notes that Ahab displays this pathology: “Phantom limb pain is described in Herman Melville’s novel Moby Dick, which was first published in 1851. Captain Ahab, who had lost his leg in a skirmish with the great white whale, stated, "A dismasted man never entirely loses the feeling of his old spar . . . And I still feel the smart of my crushed leg, though it be now so long dissolved” (Melville 391).
who, that lifts this arm?” (445) This occurs in Chapter 132, when the ultimate duel with Moby Dick is impending, all his delusions, bitter feelings from the castration trauma, and self-reflection that ensued converge in this one single question, interrogating his own identity. Ahab lost the certainty of his identity, not knowing who directs his bodily movement, thinking even of God. His question of “I, God, or who” strikes us as the fundamental perplexity that is shared largely by the disabled.

**Conclusion**

From a Žižekian perspective, therefore, the fixed, inflexible symbolic order does nothing but distances the subject from reality. The Žižekian analysis meaningfully fortifies the examination done by proponents of disability studies, since it cannot be denied that the symbolic identity of captain is grounded upon the presupposition of being abled physically. The disabled subject is deprived of the opportunity to serve on board even if they are strong enough to carry out the task. Under the symbolic mask-mandate which lies to the subject and misleads him to trust only the healthy people, “disability is characterized as lack, loss, or exclusionary difference for which compensation is needed to achieve the equality justice promises” (Garland-Thomson, “The Cultural Logic” 106). Just as it is demonstrated on the Pequod, the imperfect, contaminated human form indicated by disability becomes scapegoated difference on the level of the symbolic, serving “as the master trope of human disqualification” (Mitchell and Snyder, Narrative Prosthesis 3). Hence, understanding that the blind doctrine in the symbolic has blocked the subject from seeing the reality, “that direful mishap” experienced by the disabled Ahab is not only what is described by Melville, “at the bottom of” Ahab’s “temporary recluseness” (Melville 386), but at the root of the big Other, which is always virtually there. The big Other is invisible and yet omnipresent as long as it infiltrates our subjectivity. To avoid falling into the snare of the symbolic mask-mandate, thus, one should not be intimidated by the bizarre logic of the question, “Whom do you believe, your eyes or my words?” We have to avoid following the desire of the question, which attempts to lead us astray from the direct reality when there is something that it does not want us to see. Rather, we should simply answer: I believe my eyes.

**Works Cited**


