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“White Whales and White Baseballs: Examining the Literary
 Significance of Baseball Within *The Art of Fielding*”

“When I was young, I was so interested in baseball that my family was afraid I'd waste my life and be a pitcher. Later they were afraid I'd waste my life and be a poet. They were right.” —Robert Frost—

Countless novels have been written, and movies produced, about baseball. In my paper, I hope to get to the bottom of why this is. Is it because, as Billy Beane (General Manager of the Oakland A's) said, “*It's hard not to be romantic about baseball*”?¹ Baseball is a game that, in its essence, is much more than just a game. It is a representation of the proverbial American Dream. It is a game of failure, and one of redemption. The very nature of the game of baseball lends itself to themes of comradeship and a Homeric journey, or odyssey—if you excuse my word play. Because of readily available themes that seem to go so well with a baseball story, however, many authors face the obstacle of their work being lumped into a category of a “baseball novel.” There is nothing necessarily wrong with being a baseball novelist, but it can understandably be frustrating to authors not to be given credit or legitimacy in the literary sphere. Chad Harbach circumvents the relegation to a “baseball novelist” because his novel, *The Art of Fielding*, is written in a way that embraces the stereotypical baseball novel archetypes, while simultaneously clashing with them. In order to fully study the way in which Harbach's novel works as a piece of literature, we must examine the way in which Harbach uses the game of baseball in order to tell a story about Henry Skrimshander before delving deeper into where baseball fits into the literary sphere. Harbach tells the

¹ Bennett Miller, *Moneyball*, 2011. (qtd. in O'Malley)

story of Henry Skrimshander in a way that utilizes many traditional ideas from classic literature including: the notion of male-bonding, the Homeric archetype, dealing with self doubt and failure, and the dangers of basing one's way of going through life around their favorite piece of literature. In doing so, Harbach's novel shows that there is a reason that so many authors choose to write about baseball: the game itself is an embodiment of these literary tropes.

Chad Harbach's *The Art of Fielding* follows Henry Skrimshander throughout his journey from South Dakota to enrolling at Westish College, a fictional small college located in Northeastern Wisconsin, which is depicted as the prototypical college.² Henry's journey begins when he is playing a Legion summer game in Peoria, Illinois against Mike Schwartz—a rising sophomore on the baseball team at Westish.³ After the game, Schwartz witnesses Henry jog back out to shortstop to take extra groundballs, and witnesses in amazement, a “single transcendent talent, some unique brilliance that the world would consent to call genius” (Harbach, 6). After seeing Henry's fielding prowess, Schwartz begins the process of Schwartz getting Henry into Westish College. Henry's life comes to revolve around his team, the Westish Harpooners, all of whom carry their own secrets: Schwartz hides his final rejection from law school as graduation approaches. Henry's gay roommate Owen, a walk-on with a penchant for reading in the dugout, draws the attentions of none other than Westish President Guert Affenlight, new both to baseball and the affections of men. (Wernecke) Furthermore, President Affenlight's daughter, Pella, returns to live with her father after her marriage to David, a pompous, much older man, begins to fall apart. The marriage seems as though it was doomed from

² Harbach, *The Art of Fielding*, 14.

³ Harbach, *The Art of Fielding*, 3.

the outset, as the reader learns that Pella ran away from home to marry David after High School, passing up on attending Yale.

The fashion in which Harbach presents his characters to the reader elicits sympathy from the reader, as all the characters seem to be going through their own problems and have their own flaws. Tim Wendel⁴ writes about the phenomenon of the reader rooting for the characters within Harbach's novel in his review from the

Washington Independent Review of Books:

Once all the characters are really in play, *The Art of Fielding*, like any good story or game, begins to pick up speed. All the major protagonists, from Henry and Mike, to Owen and Pella and her father Guert, are vulnerable in ways that go way beyond how we may picture life on a college baseball team or at a campus of higher learning to be. We find ourselves rooting for them, even though we cannot imagine how all of this is going to play out. (Wendel)

Along the line of rooting for the characters, as Wendel describes, the reader follows Henry, Mike Schwartz, Owen, Pella, Guert, and the rest of the characters through trials and tribulations that are common in the "real" world.

In order to best begin the examination of *The Art of Fielding*, we must first look at what Chad Harbach had to say when discussing his novel with Robyn Creswell of the *Paris Review*, who writes, "Chad Harbach's first novel, is a book about baseball in the way that *Moby-Dick* is a book about whaling—it is and it isn't" (Creswell). This distinction by Creswell is of utmost importance when examining *The Art of Fielding*, both on its own and in relation to *Moby-Dick*. Throughout the interview, Harbach provides context for some of his intentions when writing *The Art of Fielding*. When asked about his interest in fielding instead of the offensive game, Harbach responds that to be a good infielder "you have to be so graceful and economical...and there's

⁴ A professor at Johns Hopkins University

something lovely about the patience and prevailing calm that's required to wait, and wait, and wait, and then explode into action at just the right moment" (Creswell). When asked about the role baseball plays in Henry's life, Harbach responds:

For Henry the diamond is safety and refuge—he knows what will be demanded of him out there, and he knows that he can provide it. The game is complex, of course, but it holds out the hope of being perfectly knowable. Life is much scarier, its demands much more shifty and unknowable. I guess what happens to Henry is that he's spent his entire career striving to make life as simple as baseball. It works for a while, but it's a doomed project, and suddenly baseball becomes as complex as life. (Creswell)

Harbach also explains his reasoning for writing a "novel that happens to be about baseball" rather than a "baseball book" is that he "wanted to avoid writing a 'baseball book' in the same way that a novelist writing about sex wants to avoid writing pornography. If the sex is the point, then it's porn. And if the outcome of a baseball game is the point, then it's baseball porn" (Creswell). For Harbach, the outcome of a baseball game is not the point of his novel; instead Harbach uses morals and character relationships found in *Moby-Dick* in order to present them in a way that is more readily accessible to the reader, as they are repositioned from a whaling ship to a modern-day college campus.

The Art of Fielding was Chad Harbach's first major novel, and after a substantial bidding war for publishing rights, Harbach received an advance of \$650,000.⁵ Harbach's novel has received so many positive reviews, that there are plans to adapt his novel into a movie.⁶ That being said, while Harbach's novel has been widely acclaimed, there have been critiques of the novel. One of these critiques comes from Anis Shivani's essay, "Chad Harbach's *The Art of Fielding*: College Baseball as an Allegory for American

⁵ Gessen, *Vanity Fair*

⁶ Galuppo, *Hollywood Reporter*

National Greatness.” In order to repudiate Shivani’s argument, we must examine her argument one contention at a time.

Shivani’s first contention against Harbach’s novel is that, “There seems no transcendent purpose in using *Moby-Dick* as a touchstone for everything from Guert’s Melville scholarship to the Melville statue at Westish... [The Melville references] are just insider jokes to placate the readership” (Shivani, 54). Contrary to Shivani’s view regarding the inclusion of *Moby-Dick* within the novel, the reader should not overlook the references to Melville, as Harbach uses *Moby-Dick* as a device to bring up many of the same discussions regarding relationship dynamics, gender roles, and life as a whole.

Within the context of her essay, Shivani misses Harbach’s important inclusion of two texts within his novel, one of which is Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. To begin the examination of the art of misreading, we turn first to Guert Affenlight whose favorite piece of literature is “The Lee Shore,” a chapter from *Moby-Dick*. Even though Affenlight’s favorite book is *Moby-Dick* he is caught within a misreading of the text, as “upon his first reading [of the opening lines], Affenlight failed to untangle the syntax before the semicolon, but that final clause embedded itself swiftly in his soul” (Harbach, 51). Not only does Affenlight self-admittedly misread *Moby-Dick*, but early in his academic career, he writes an entire book, *The Sperm-Squeezers*, “about the cult of male friendship in nineteenth-century America. Boys’ clubs, whale boats, baseball teams. Emotional nourishment before the modern era of gender equality” (Harbach, 189). His favorite book is, in part, about homosocial and homoerotic relationships between men,⁷ and he then writes a book on the same topic, and Guert *still* does not “unfold within

⁷ Harbach, *The Art of Fielding*, 55.

[himself]” (Harbach, 51) enough to acknowledge or address his (apparently hidden) homosexual feelings until he—at sixty years old—meets Owen, a freshman in college, beginning his first homosexual romantic relationship. Ironically, Guert spends his entire academic life writing on a topic that he unknowingly would experience. Perhaps if he had better understood *Moby-Dick*, he would have come to the realization sooner. In addition to his book being about the homosocial aspect of male-bonding, he also writes about baseball teams even though he did not consider himself a baseball fan or even fully understand the game—except for the readily available opaque aspects of the game: “Baseball—what a boring game! One player threw the ball, another caught it, a third held a bat. Everyone else stood around” (Harbach, 64). It is this failure to fully comprehend the meaning of one’s self-proclaimed favorite text that hinders the characters in *The Art of Fielding*.

Another example of a character within the novel who hinders himself is Henry through not fully understand the meaning behind the text that he worships, *The Art of Fielding* by Aparicio Rodriguez.⁸ Henry models himself after Aparicio in “every particular” (Harbach, 16), and throughout the novel, Harbach presents Henry periodically alluding to passages from the fictional *Art of Fielding* in order to show Henry’s aspirations of being the ideal shortstop, which speak directly to Henry’s situation. Ironically, Henry’s favorite excerpts were the opaque ones because, “The opaque parts [of the text], frustrating as they could be, gave Henry something to aspire to. Someday, he dreamed, he would be enough of a ballplayer to crack them open and suck out their

⁸ Henry’s idol in the novel who (fictionally) played shortstop for the St. Louis Cardinals for eighteen seasons, and is considered the “greatest shortstop who ever lived” (Harbach, 16), and his book is a detailed guide on how to play shortstop.

hidden wisdom” (Harbach, 17). Just as Affenlight could not comprehend the true meaning of *Moby-Dick*, on which he based the change in direction in his life towards scholarship, Henry cannot fully comprehend the meaning of Aparicio’s writing even though he bases his entire being as a shortstop on them.

In his article, *The Buddhist Baseball Wisdom of Aparicio Rodriguez*, Will Hansen writes, “Harbach uses Henry Skrimshander’s baseball problem as a way into complex thinking about life and the process of becoming a functioning human adult” (Hansen). Hansen dissects the excerpts from Aparicio’s book by way of examining the earliest and latest excerpts the reader is given access to, in terms of the place in fictional text—excerpt three and excerpt 213. Hansen argues that excerpt three, “3. *There are three stages: Thoughtless being. Thought. Return to thoughtless being*” (Harbach, 16), compresses Henry’s journey through the book to a Buddhist thought.⁹ The beginning of the novel shows Henry as a thoughtless being, allowing him to excel as a shortstop. The middle of the novel—marked by Henry’s pseudo-apprenticeship under Schwartz—signifies the second stage, “thought.”

It is here where Henry runs into problems. Upon arriving at Westish, Schwartz takes Henry under his wing in an effort to help Henry become the best shortstop he can be. Instead of helping Henry, however, Schwartz is detrimental to Henry’s growth, as their ideologies clash. While Henry tries to “return to thoughtless being,” in line with Aparicio’s teachings, Schwartz believes in “the production of brute efficiency out of natural genius” (Harbach, 256). Schwartz relies heavily on Roman philosophers Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus, which are described as “Schwartz’s personal Aparicios”

⁹ Hansen, *The Buddhist Baseball Wisdom of Aparicio Rodriguez*

(Harbach, 47). Schwartz would recite excerpts from these thinkers during his workouts with Henry in an effort to turn Henry into a machine: “*Every day is a war. Yes, yes it was. The key is to keep company only with people who uplift you, whose presence calls forth your best.* Done: there was only one of those. He was becoming a baseball player” (Harbach, 47). Henry may have been becoming Schwartz’s version of a baseball player, but he was moving further away from returning to a “thoughtless being” because of his failure to understand excerpt number fifty-nine:

59. To field a ground ball must be considered a generous act and an act of comprehension. One moves not against the ball but with it. Bad fielders stab at the ball like an enemy. This is antagonism. The true fielder lets the path of the ball become his own path, thereby comprehending the ball and dissipating the self, which is the source of all suffering and poor defense. (Harbach, 16)

This excerpt, if better understood by Henry, would have warned him of embracing Schwartz’s techniques regarding how to become a better shortstop. Instead of letting the path of the ball become his own path in life, he “moves against the ball” and submits to Schwartz. After all, Schwartz sees baseball as, “Homeric—not a scrum but a series of isolated contests. Batter versus pitcher, fielder versus ball” (Harbach, 259). By placing the fielder in opposition to the ball, Schwartz directly contradicts Aparicio’s teachings regarding being one with the ball, and leads Henry down the wrong path.

Using excerpt fifty-nine as a starting point, we now turn our focus on Henry and Schwartz’s problematic friendship, as it is important to fully examine the power dynamic within their friendship. As mentioned earlier, it is difficult to overlook the numerous allusions made to *Moby-Dick* when reading Harbach’s novel. On the surface, there may not seem like there would be much overlap, but Harbach explains that since *The Art of Fielding* is “in a large part a book about the varieties of male friendship, from the

antagonistic and the competitive to the deeply affectionate and the frankly sexual, and so *Moby-Dick*, taking place as it does in a very intense world of very intense men, seemed like the ideal analogue” (Creswell). Harbach also draws the comparison between a whaling ship and a baseball team, as, “in each case, a group of men who might otherwise have little in common spend an inordinate amount of time in close and not-so-comfortable quarters, excluding the world, in pursuit of a common goal” (Creswell). Throughout *The Art of Fielding*, Harbach presents his characters in a way that parallels characters from *Moby-Dick*. These are not always one-to-one analogues, but rather parallels that move around. This can be seen when looking closely at Henry who is paralleled to Moby Dick (the whale) and Schwartz who is analogous to Captain Ahab. One of the more obvious allusion Harbach makes to Melville’s work is Henry’s last name—Skrimshander. In *Moby-Dick*, skrimshander articles are defined as, “the numerous little ingenious contrivances [whalers] elaborately carve out of the rough material, in their hours of ocean leisure” (Melville, 221). This allusion speaks volumes about Harbach’s view on Henry as well as his and Schwartz’s friendship, as Schwartz is positioned as a masculine whaler that carves and forms Henry to the image that he has in his mind—a machine.

One of the first mentions of a whale in *Moby-Dick* comes when Ishmael arrives in the Spouter-Inn, and he examines the painting on the wall, which portrays a “half-foundered ship weltering with its three dismantled masts alone visible; and an exasperated whale, purposing to spring clean over the craft, is in the enormous act of impaling himself upon the three mast-heads” (Melville, 26). Henry is metaphorically “impaled” when venturing outside of his own environment or belief system, similar to the

depicted whale trying to leap out of the water and over the ship. The three mast-heads the whale becomes impaled on introduces the importance placed on the number three in *Moby-Dick*, as evidenced by three ships hunting Moby Dick for three days.¹⁰ Harbach also assigns importance to the number three, as “Aparicio believed that the number 3 had deep significance” (Harbach, 16). In this way, Harbach illustrates that it is, in part, Henry’s straying from Aparicio’s teachings—represented by the number three—that lead to his impalement.

Continuing with the examination of Henry and Schwartz’s problematic friendship, we now turn to Rebecca Neuhedel’s dissertation, *“Going Home”: Journeys of Self-Exploration in Baseball Literature*, which explores the phenomenon of male-bonding and brotherly love in baseball literature. Neuhedel argues, “The journey of the self, and thus the education of the self, plays out uniquely when combined with the close relationship between two men, players or not, in the baseball novel” (Neuhedel, 90). Within Harbach’s novel, the characters are searching for their own understanding of “self,” and as she points out, this journey, when combined with the baseball novel, plays out in unique form. This form allows Harbach to build Henry and Schwartz’s friendship in line with this archetype only to tear it down, which makes the downfall more significant. At first, Henry and Schwartz seem to fit perfectly within Neuhedel’s notion that “modern baseball fiction reinvents the story of brotherly love between two men. The hero connects with another man, building a bond as tight as that described between twins” (Neuhedel, 90), which is evidenced by Henry and Schwartz being inseparable upon Henry’s arrival at Westish. Schwartz—after single-handedly getting Henry into Westish— immediately

¹⁰ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 419.

takes Henry under his wing and invites him to workouts in order to turn him into the best player that he can be. This bond that develops between Henry and Schwartz, however, seems to be doomed from the outset, as Schwartz's similarities to Ahab begin to show.

Their relationship, while it is one of friendship, is predominantly a mentor-mentee relationship with Schwartz holding the power in their relationship, mentoring Henry throughout the novel after helping Henry get accepted at Westish College. When Schwartz goes on his first date with Pella, he tells her the history of his friendship with Henry, which Pella recounts for the reader: "Let me see if I have this straight. Ever since [Schwartz] met Henry, you've been his mentor. Teaching him what to eat, what classes to take, how to hit a [fastball], whatever. Henry doesn't move from point A to point B without thinking, *How would Mike want me to do this?*" (Harbach, 140) This, in part, represents the power Schwartz has over Henry. When Henry begins his struggles on the field, Schwartz takes Henry's problems home with him, and he ends up discussing potential solutions with Pella. While Pella suggests that Henry see a psychologist,¹¹ Schwartz remains adamant that *he* is the only one that can help Henry. The conversation spirals out of control, and Pella realizes that, from Schwartz's perspective, it looked as though "she was trying to insert herself into his relationship with Henry. She was implying that she, or a therapist, could help Henry where [Schwartz] could not" (Harbach, 239). Pella believes that Schwartz is not afraid of Henry seeing a therapist because it would not help; instead she believes, Schwartz is "afraid that it *will* help. What scares [Schwartz] is that [Henry will] get drafted and go pro and be fine. Better than fine. He'll be happy as a clam and won't need [Schwartz] anymore. But as long as he's at

¹¹ Harbach, *The Art of Fielding*, 239.

Westish, as long as he's a mess, then [Schwartz is] still running the show" (Harbach, 241). If Henry leaves Westish, then Schwartz would lose his purpose in life. Schwartz, like Ahab and his white whale, has invested countless hours concerning himself with Henry, and if his version of the whale leaves, he is left with nothing.

Schwartz whose analogue is Captain Ahab—a man who has almost no interest in friendship—handles the situation with Henry in a similar manner to that of the friendship between Ahab and Pip, the one person who begins to get close to him. In *Moby-Dick*, the reader learns about Pip's misadventures and how he was responsible for a caught whale escaping after Tashtego had to cut the line after it became wrapped around Pip's neck.¹² The first time this happens, Stubb forgives Pip, just as Schwartz and the rest of the team forgive Henry after his first error, as Schwartz reassures Henry, "Not your fault, Skrimmer" (Harbach, 79). Pip, like Henry, makes the same mistake twice, as "Pip jumped again" (Melville, 321) and in response, Pip is left floating adrift until another boat picks him up. In the same way that Pip is left floating adrift after his second mistake, Schwartz begins to feel as though he was distancing "himself from Henry, to cut Skrimmer adrift while pretending nothing had changed" (Harbach, 203) after Henry has another game in which he commits errors. Ahab eventually distances himself from Pip because he fears his determination will soften as a result of being around Pip,¹³ and leaves Pip in the cabin. Harbach presents an analogue to this moment from *Moby-Dick* after Coach Cox tells Henry that he has to break the news that he has decided to quit the team to Schwartz. Henry apologizes to Schwartz for his breakdown during the game and walking off of the field, and, in response, Schwartz abandons Henry out of anger—or

¹² Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 320.

¹³ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 399.

possibly for the same reason Ahab abandons Pip—and leads the team out to practice. Just as Ahab's mission allows for none of the warmth of friendship, Schwartz's mission to win a National Championship leaves Henry—and their friendship—behind, leaving Henry alone in the locker room. Henry is surprised that his anger at Schwartz was not subsiding, because he is initially under the impression that “he, not Schwartz, had messed everything up. He, not Schwartz, was to blame. And yet every memory that popped into his head as he sat there in that underground room think with memories was a memory of Schwartz causing him pain” (Harbach, 377). Henry partially recognizes the negative role that Schwartz had played in his life by only being able think of instances in which Schwartz had caused him pain. However, Henry cannot help but feel as though that “without Schwartz pushing him, torturing him, he wouldn't be here. Schwartz had brought him here and now he was f***ed. Before he met Schwartz his dreams were just dreams” (Harbach, 378). Henry is right. He would not be in this place of abandonment and failure if Schwartz had not turned him into a machine. Henry was the one with the “single transcendent talent” (Harbach, 6), not Schwartz. Schwartz maps his own view concerning hard work and improving the physical body, but in doing so, Henry moves further from his dreams of understanding the opaque parts of Aparicio's text as well as moving further from his return to a “thoughtless being.”

While Henry may not realize it, he is actually correct in thinking that Schwartz is the one who “messed everything up.” Dr. Rachels—a therapist who begins working with Henry after he gets hit in the head with a pitch and ends up in the hospital—agrees with this notion that Schwartz is the one to blame, as she plays a role in helping Henry overcome this attachment to Schwartz. In a way, Dr. Rachels attempts to rescue Henry,

just as *The Rachel* rescues Ishmael¹⁴ from the shipwreck caused by Ahab's manic obsession with Moby Dick. She sees the "ethically dubious things Henry had done—sleeping with Pella, quitting the team—were justifiable and even borderline heroic, because they asserted his independence from Schwartz, whom Dr. Rachels considered an oppressive, tyrannical, oedipal figure in Henry's life" (Harbach, 507). Dr. Rachels' analysis of Henry and Schwartz's friendship throughout the text is supported by way of analyzing the way in which Schwartz is presented as an analogue to Captain Ahab. Furthering the connection between Ahab and Schwartz, towards the end of the novel, when the Harpooners are preparing for the championship game, Schwartz is explicitly called Ahab:

None of Schwartz's teammates had Schwartzian ambitions. They just wanted to win a baseball game. Which was fine, better than fine, perfect, but it left him without a speech... He didn't know if *he* was ready to play—his mind was everywhere, sleepless and scattered and sentimental—but they sure were. If he was the Ahab of this operation, this tournament the target of his mania, then they were Fedallah's secret crew. (Harbach, 453-454)

As Mike Schwartz is clearly the leader—and Ahab figure—of the Harpooners, his object of obsession is not only winning a National Championship—as the tournament is described as "the target of his mania" (Harbach, 454)—but also Henry.

Early in the novel Schwartz and Henry are having a conversation about Henry's potential future of becoming a professional baseball player. Schwartz tells Henry that the key to reaching his potential "is to stick to the plan. You can't control the draft. And if you can't control it, it's not worth your time. You can only control how hard you work today" (Harbach, 109). The plan, of course, is Schwartz's plan. Part of his plan is to motivate Henry by telling him a story about his future self. Schwartz believes that is the

¹⁴ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 427.

key to coaching baseball; you decide what story the player wants to hear from someone, and “then you told the guy that story. You told it with a hint of doom. You included his flaws. You emphasized the obstacles that could prevent him from succeeding. That was what made the story epic: the player, the hero, had to suffer mightily en route to his final triumph” (Harbach, 149). Schwartz believes that “people loved to suffer, as long as the suffering made sense. Everybody suffered. The key was to choose the form of your suffering” (Harbach, 149), and it was the coach’s job to determine what form of suffering to employ. Through an examination of *The Art of Fielding* with the analogue of *Moby-Dick* in mind, Schwartz’s belief regarding suffering is proven to be the incorrect belief. It is Ahab’s object of suffering that eventually leads to his death, as well as Henry and Schwartz’s embrace of suffering that leads to their friendship coming apart at the seams.

The relationship between Schwartz and Henry is complex enough, but Harbach also presents Pella as the glue that seems to hold the team together from the outside, breaking from the norm of baseball novels and giving a female character a prominent role in the novel. Not only does Harbach include a prominent female character in his novel, but he also gives her agency. This fact is most evident where the novel shifts to her point of view in several chapters. In this way, Harbach avoids the trope of glazing over the impact of women in literature, as Pella “hated the namelessness of women in stories, as they lived and died so that men could have metaphysical insights” (Harbach, 118). In keeping with the idea of naming women in stories, Harbach chooses the name *Pella*, which was the name of the ancient Greek city—located in Macedonia—and served as the capital for Alexander the Great.¹⁵ The Romans eventually sacked the city in 168 BC, as

¹⁵ Google, *Pella, Greece*.

Schwartz mentions when he first meets her.¹⁶ In a way, Pella herself is metaphorically “sacked” by David when she runs away from home to marry him and live in San Francisco.¹⁷ The marriage leaves Pella in ruins, mirroring the fate of the ancient city. It can also be interpreted, however, as Pella finally being “conquered” by Schwartz, who is writing his thesis on Marcus Aurelius, a Roman Emperor who ruled Rome when the Romans sacked Pella. In my opinion, Harbach presents Pella as an example of yet another character who is lost in life, but without the attachment to baseball, in an effort to further demonstrate the journey to find one’s true self in life similar to Ishmael’s desire to join a whaling ship on a voyage, leaving his old life behind in *Moby-Dick*.

Within the context of the two novels, similarities can be seen when examining Pella compared to Melville’s Ishmael. The first similarity the reader recognizes is the way in which both characters introduce themselves. In Pella’s case, when she first meets Schwartz, she purposefully does not divulge her last name: “‘Pella,’ she said, leaving off her surname. She felt a pleasant anonymity, born of the swirling snow and Mike Schwartz’s apparent indifference to her presence, which she was afraid her father’s name might dispel” (Harbach, 115). In comparison, Melville introduces the reader to his narrator through having Ishmael (now famously) introduce himself by addressing the reader, “Call me Ishmael” (Melville, 18). The footnote included for the reader helps further the connection between Pella and Ishmael in that both are first-born children who are outcasts from “great” families:

The name of the first-person narrator implies that he is an outcast from a great family. Ishmael is the oldest son of the patriarch Abraham, by the Egyptian Hagar, servant to his then-barren wife Sarah; Sarah mistreats Hagar, who flees

¹⁶ Harbach, *The Art of Fielding*, 116.

¹⁷ Harbach, *The Art of Fielding*, 141-142.

into the desert, where an angel feeds her and reveals that she is pregnant with Ishmael, who will be a “wild man,” whose “hand will be against every man, and every man’s hand against him” (Genesis 16:12). (Melville, 18)

In addition to the way in which they introduce each other, Ishmael and Pella both travel with almost no personal belongings:

Pella left San Francisco with only a floppy, cane-handled wicker bag that contained whatever remained from her last trip to the beach nine months ago, a useless assortment of crap—sunglasses, tampons, gummy worms, sand—to which she’d added nothing but her wallet and a black bathing suit, designed for serious swimming. (Harbach, 82)

Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. (Melville, 18)

In the grand scheme of the novel, Pella can be mistaken for a minor character, which is similar to M.H. Abrams’s analysis of Ishmael being “only a minor or peripheral” participant in the story he tells (Abrams cites Nick Carraway of *The Great Gatsby* as another example of this device).¹⁸ Both Pella and Ishmael are presented as somewhat outsiders in a male-dominated world, consisting of baseball or whaling, but Pella inhabits an important and necessary space within the context of the novel that forces Henry to grow independent of Schwartz when she and Schwartz begin dating, while also acting as the voice of reason for the two. In a more scholarly analysis, David Pegram would describe Pella as an embodiment of the baseball archetypal image, which he calls “the sage” or “someone who offers help” (qtd. in Donelson and Nilsen, 104) (Pegram, 53). Ironically, Pegram further describes the sage as taking “The Innocent [Henry] ‘under his wing’” (Pegram, 53). Pella’s positioning as the sage in Harbach’s novel rejects the assumption that the sage would be a man, while it is also ironic that Pella’s archetypal

¹⁸ Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 303.

image is more akin to one who takes another under their wing, whereas Schwartz attempts to do so earlier in the novel.

In addition to acting as “the sage,” Pella also acts as the wedge that ultimately fosters the break between Henry and Schwartz. Henry realizes later in the novel that “if Pella and Schwartz made a perfect whole, like the yin and yang on Owen’s favorite pajamas, or the two halves of a baseball’s cover, two infinity-shaped pieces of leather stitched together with love’s red thread, there was no room for Henry” (Harbach, 420). This realization hits Henry hard, not necessarily because he is left out, but because he believes their friendship was destined to have to change from the beginning:

If you were a boy and you loved a girl, you could make plans together. And if you were a boy and you loved a boy...then you could make plans together too. The world would be against you, would threaten you and call you names, but at least it would understand. It had words for what you were doing. But if you were Henry and you needed Mike you were simply screwed. There were no words for that, no ceremony that would guarantee your future. Every day was just that: a day, a blank, a nothing, in which you had to invent yourself and your friendship from scratch. The weight of everything you’d ever done was nothing. It could all vanish, just like that. Just like this. (Harbach, 420-421)

It is this inevitable break from Schwartz that begins to foster Henry’s growth, proving that their friendship was problematic.

Shivani’s second contention against Harbach’s novel is, what she perceives as, an idealized worldview within Harbach’s novel. Shivani argues that by narrowing Henry’s worldview to simply becoming the best baseball player he can be, Harbach “rejects the messy world, zeroing in on the self-sufficiency of the subject” (Shivani, 41). Harbach does not present his characters as being self-sufficient, the most explicit example of which is Henry being completely dependent on Schwartz.¹⁹ While I understand Shivani’s

¹⁹ Harbach, *The Art of Fielding*, 140.

argument concerning what seems to be an idealized worldview, upon closer examination, one sees the lessons Harbach intends for the reader. The first of which is accepting others for who they are. Schwartz does not fully accept Henry for who he is as a shortstop, as he focuses on turning him into a brutally efficient machine instead of helping him to return to a “thoughtless being.” While Henry is not accepted for who he is, Owen—Henry’s roommate—is accepted for who he is. For example, Owen’s race hardly being mentioned who “is so light-skinned as to be almost unrecognizable as a black person” (Shivani, 43). Shivani sees this oversight regarding race as a negative trait of the novel, as “it takes the visit of Owen’s pronouncedly black mother Genevieve...to remind Guert that his young lover is indeed black. Blackness is neatly eliminated as a political issue” (Shivani, 43-44). Instead of reading Harbach’s portrayal of Guert’s color blindness as a negative, as Shivani does, it is important to consider that Harbach demonstrates that it *is* possible for people of different races, backgrounds, and sexualities to come together as one in an effort to work towards a common goal.

Harbach does not place an emphasis on Owen’s race, just as he does not harp on the fact that Owen is gay. In fact, Harbach presents Henry as being completely accepting of Owen, even though his parents do not share in this acceptance. When Henry calls his parents on Thanksgiving, his parents ask him why he had not told them that Owen was gay (Henry’s sister had told them), to which Henry simply responds, “Owen’s a good roommate. He’s nice” (Harbach, 26). Henry’s mother clearly takes issue with Henry being assigned to room with Owen, asking Henry: “I’m not saying gay people aren’t nice. I’m saying, is this the best environment for *you*, honey? I mean you share a bedroom! You share a bathroom! Doesn’t it make you uncomfortable?” (Harbach, 26). Henry’s

father also chimes in saying that he sure hopes it makes Henry uncomfortable (Harbach, 26). Henry, in comparison, barely batted an eye when Owen introduced himself as his “gay mulatto roommate” (Harbach, 18). Owen introduces himself in a similar manner to Coach Cox before the first baseball practice, saying, “Owen Dunne. Right fielder. I trust you don’t object to having a gay man on your team” (Harbach, 35). Coach Cox replies that the only thing he objects to is Schwartz also playing on the football team because it is bad for his knees.²⁰ The difference between Henry and Coach Cox’s reaction and the reaction of his parents further signifies the acceptance demonstrated by the main characters of Harbach’s novel though it is important that he shows the presence they resist to conform to racist or homophobic prejudices. Harbach also breaks from the stereotype that talented athletes cannot also be gay, as Owen is a talented baseball player, exemplified in his round of batting practice:

When batting practice began, Owen knocked one line drive after another back up the middle of the batting cage. Sal Phlox, who was feeding balls into the old-fashioned machine, kept having to duck behind his protective screen. “Get out of there, Dunne,” grumbled Coach Cox. “Before you hurt someone.” (Harbach, 36)

In the same way that Owen’s sexuality is accepted by all of Harbach’s characters at Westish, the characters, including Pella, also accept Guert’s newfound sexuality. When Pella first finds out that her dad is gay, she tells Henry, “I mean, if my dad’s gay, and he’s happy, then it’s no big deal, right? Or even if he’s gay and unhappy, it’s still not that big a deal” (Harbach, 355). Instead of presenting Pella of being shocked or hurt that her father had hid his new homosexual relationship from her, Harbach shows Pella as being completely accepting and happy for her father.

²⁰ Harbach, *The Art of Fielding*, 35.

Furthermore, Shivani contends that Harbach's novel is a rejection of the messy world, which in turn represents "American national greatness" because of the proximity and parallels to baseball, which is a misunderstanding of the novel as a whole. Instead of reading the novel as a rejection of the messy world, it is imperative to read Harbach's novel as a commentary on relationships of all kinds (friendship as well as romantic relationships), which are presented to the reader as a commentary regarding college life in the same way that Melville's *Moby-Dick* is not a novel that rejects the world around it, but rather a novel with more contextual layers than originally meets the eye. Shivani argues that Harbach's idealized writing lends itself to promoting an idealized America as being perfect. She contends, "baseball functions in a similar nostalgic/ idealized manner. It embodies everything good about America, and Harbach shows not the least irony when describing the highs and lows of the sport" (Shivani, 45). First of all, Harbach most definitely deploys irony when discussing one of the most important themes of his text: the misreading and misuse of literature. Ironically, Shivani does not recognize the irony of arguably the three most important characters of the novel all basing their actions on texts that they admittedly do not fully understand, only to fail when trying to use their misunderstood texts to reach their dreams. It is also important to note that the three characters who rely most heavily on their own misreadings of their favorite texts seem destined to fail. President Affenlight has a heart attack and dies, Schwartz returns to Westish College as a coach after being adamantly opposed to coaching, and Henry seems as though he is going to return to Westish for his senior season instead of signing his contract with the St. Louis Cardinals. While Henry, Guert, and Schwartz all fail to achieve their respective dreams, Owen and Pella achieve their goals of studying abroad in

Japan and returning to college respectively. The striking difference between the two groups of characters—those who failed versus those who succeeded—is that the first group, which based their entire beings on an outside text, failed to reach their dreams. Just as in baseball, we cannot all achieve our dreams in life, and the ones who do, are the ones that do not attempt to live up to outside notions of what they think they need to be.

Along these lines, baseball, while it does embody the proverbial ‘American Dream,’ is also a game of failure. To say, “baseball represents national innocence in its purest form” (Shivani, 45-46) is a misunderstanding of what baseball is at its core. Baseball does not reward everyone who works hard. Baseball, like life, is unfair. It will crush dreams. For example, Schwartz is portrayed as a hard worker on and off the baseball field, but his dreams of going to Law School and becoming the Governor of Illinois are crushed when he does not get into any of the Law Schools to which he applied.²¹ Moreover, Harbach’s novel does not have a happy ending where all of the problems within the novel are happily resolved. Yes, the Harpooners win the championship, but the characters are still left with the problems they have dealt with throughout the novel. For instance, Harbach deploys the common baseball cliché, *There’s always next year*, in an effort to somewhat veil the unfortunate ending of his novel, but the reader is left questioning whether or not another year of similar drama would even be worth it.

Baseball is known for the clichés that are prevalent within the culture of the game—whether it be from the broadcasters, the players answering questions in interviews, or fans talking about the game. One cliché that is extremely popular because

²¹ Harbach, *The Art of Fielding*, 117.

of the hope that comes along with it is “there’s always next year.” The idea of looking to the *next* year is wishful thinking, however, because it is not always realistic outside of the realm of baseball. For example, when Schwartz tells Pella that he did not get into any law schools (upon first meeting her), Pella reassures Schwartz by invoking the old baseball cliché, “Well, there’s always next year” (Harbach, 117).

Harbach nevertheless ends his novel by submitting to the “there’s always next year” cliché as he hints at Henry forgoing the draft, and returning to Westish for his senior year—staying with Schwartz. Shivani may have missed Harbach’s intended meaning when he submits to this cliché, as it does not represent an idealized view of the world, but rather further represents the problematic nature of Henry and Schwartz’s friendship. Henry does not want to mail in his signed professional contract with the Cardinals. Instead, he wants to return to Westish,²² even though, as Schwartz points out, “If [he] mail[s] in that contract, [he] can think about [himself], [his] game, twenty-four-seven” (Harbach, 509). Through an examination of Henry and Schwartz’s analogues from *Moby-Dick*—the whale and Ahab respectively—, however, the end of Harbach’s novel can be better understood. The ending of *The Art of Fielding* is somewhat ambiguous, as it is unclear to the reader whether or not Henry is going to forego the MLB Draft and return to Westish College for his senior season, thus staying with Schwartz who is returning as an assistant coach. Just as Ahab and Moby Dick are destined to be together after Ahab’s harpoon impales the whale, but then drags him under the sea—attached to the whale.²³ The ending of his novel, confirms that his novel should be given more scholarly credit, as Harbach skillfully uses literary tropes found in a classic piece of

²² Harbach, *The Art of Fielding*, 509.

²³ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 426.

literature—*Moby-Dick*—and applies them to college. In doing so, Harbach makes the lessons one can learn through a correct reading of *Moby-Dick* more readily accessible to the reader, as it is repositioned to a modern-day college campus instead of on a whaling ship.

Baseball is a game where perfection is not expected, but striving to be perfect is prevalent. It is the only major sport in the United States that has a term for a “perfect game,” which refers to a game in which the pitcher does not allow a single baserunner. Perfection is “what [Henry] was after out there” (Harbach, 112). Just as the quest to kill Moby Dick leads to Ahab’s downfall and Schwartz’s quest to win a championship begins to unravel him, it is Henry’s quest for perfection that ultimately leads to his downfall, as trying to attain perfection often comes up short. Even when a pitcher throws a perfect game, the results may be “perfect,” but the execution of every pitch is rarely ever perfect. This unavoidable, negative outcome when striving for perfection leads to failure. While perfection is an unattainable goal for most, Harbach portrays the game of baseball in a way that demonstrates how to deal with failure. Baseball, at its core, is a game of failure, and to have success, one must be adept at dealing with failure as well as being able to focus on controlling what he can control at the given moment. Shivani’s argument that by portraying his characters and their lives in an idealized form, Harbach “seems to yearn for an America functioning purely according to just deserts for talent: one may come from a poor Chicago background, like Schwartz, or from the Midwestern countryside like Henry, but victory on the field makes the differences moot” (Shivani, 46), is a failure to recognize the disappointment experienced in the personal lives of Guert, Henry, and Schwartz.

Shivani's third contention against Harbach's novel is that by "borrowing the gist of the campus novel, the baseball novel, and the gay novel, Harbach has done nothing less than strip each of the three genres of subversive content, ending up with the shells of three familiar convention but none of their angst" (Shivani, 43). Writing a novel that combines "the gist of the campus novel, the baseball novel, and the gay novel" should not be considered an undesirable aspect to a novel. Instead, it is reflective of reality. As in his refusal to write "baseball porn," Harbach tries not to write a novel about just baseball, but about life. Harbach's novel is not arguing for the reduction of these three complex genres of novels, but instead attempts to make his novel more realistic to the reader through combining them. Because Harbach does not just write about the baseball aspects of collegiate life, and instead molds the themes of the gay novel, the campus novel, *and* the baseball novel, his novel becomes closer to a real-life representation in comparison to the perception of the baseball novel.

This is better understood when looking at *why* Harbach may have used this technique in writing his novel. In chapter five of his book, *Making the Team: The Cultural Work of Baseball Fiction*, Timothy Morris poses the question of whether baseball novels are literature to the reader. In addressing genre fiction novels, specifically baseball novels, Morris contends, "texts published as works of genre fiction are sometimes granted a quasi-literary status with the remote possibility of someday getting full literary status" (Morris, 149). While some novels may break out of their quasi-literary status, some are never given a chance, because—in the eyes of many—"they are *novels*, but not *real* novels" (Morris, 149). Morris acknowledges the debate concerning what is considered "literature" (footnote to Morris 148) in beginning his argument

concerning the “baseball novel” being about more than *just* baseball even though many follow a similar archetype:

One can establish a plot archetype for the baseball novel, a team seems to be headed for failure(s) both on and off the field, finds inspiration, blends as a unit, and wins the Big Game for the championship. However unrealistically, the championship in a baseball novel tends to be decided by a single game on the last day of the season. (Morris, 155)

Chad Harbach’s *The Art of Fielding* follows the common archetype presented by Morris, while also clashing with it, as seen through a more thorough examination of the specifics of baseball literature. As mentioned in the introduction, Harbach’s novel circumvents the relegation to a “baseball novel” because *The Art of Fielding* is written in a way that embraces the stereotypical baseball novel archetypes, while simultaneously clashing with them. For instance, Morris argues that the genre of baseball literature plays a role in fostering homophobia, trying to establish English as a national language, and creating “meritocracy.”²⁴ This trope, while found in other baseball novels, is not present in Harbach’s novel. Instead, Harbach demonstrates the open-mindedness of his characters, which is evidenced in how Owen is treated as an equal by his teammates, and more specifically, Henry.

David M. Pegram, similar to Morris, examines the workings of baseball literature in his work, “Archetypal Images in Young Adult Baseball Fiction, 1988-2007.” While Shivani criticizes Harbach for portraying his characters as living in an idealized world, Pegram would have lauded Harbach for his work in developing his characters and the plot of his novel:

The realism found in sports-themed young adult novels has developed over the past thirty years, just as it has with young adult literature as a whole. Prior to that,

²⁴ Morris, *Making the Team: The Cultural Work of Baseball Fiction*, 128.

dime novels about sports focused primarily on game action, with little regard for plot and character development. In 1976, Ken Doneison made six generalizations about sports fiction, including "Fair play is the only way to play. Being a good sport, in winning or losing, is essential for the athlete" and "Sports can teach a boy how to choose and make important moral commitments and how to face life's problems" (qtd. in Crowe 28-29). Plot and character development were secondary to the moral of the story. (Pegram, 20)

Pegram presents the argument of sports being an avenue for teaching readers how to respond to life's problems, which Harbach captures within his novel through the portrayal of his characters, while also moving away from simply writing about "game action." Instead of categorizing *The Art of Fielding* as a baseball novel, I believe it fits within the frame of the "problem novel." Pegram, quoting Kenneth L. Donelson and Alleen Pace Nilsen, argues that within this genre, young readers "will have a better chance to be happy if they have realistic expectations and if they know both the bad and the good about the society in which they live" (qtd. in Donelson and Nilsen 117).²⁵

Through his examination of archetypes found within baseball novels, Pegram looks closely at Will Weaver's *Striking Out*, in which the main character, Billy Baggs, fits into the "Baseball Seeker" archetype.²⁶ In more ways than one, Henry Skrimshander fits this archetype, but there is also some resistance, on Harbach's part, to fully embrace the archetype. For instance, while Weaver's Billy Baggs ultimately finds the outcome of the game to be secondary, as his team loses the final game and "Billy realizes that there is always a next season to look forward to" (Pegram, 95), the "next season" in *The Art of Fielding* does not carry the same feelings of hope. It is this rejection of the common

²⁵ Pegram, "Archetypal Images in Young Adult Baseball Fiction, 1988-2007," 21-22.

²⁶ "Those characters who go on their quests by their own free will, with a specific goal in mind" (Pegram, 50)

baseball archetype that fosters the break from baseball archetypes and moves his novel closer to the “realistic” argued by Morris²⁷ and Pegram.²⁸

With this notion of realism in Harbach’s *The Art of Fielding* in mind, it is helpful to return to Harbach’s inclusion of Aparicio’s text within the text. The final entry from *The Art* presented to the reader— “213. *Death is the sanction of all that the athlete does*” (Harbach, 17)—carries a few different meanings in the context of the novel. Hansen examines the various meanings of the word “sanction,” which vary from permission to a punishment, but ultimately relate back to the athlete in the sense that Schwartz recognizes, “encouraging production of the grace and beauty that athletes feel and display in the use of the lively body that will eventually perish and move no more... And athletes grow older, lose their skills. The athlete must become reconciled to the mini-death of losing the body’s ability, an image of the larger, final death of the body and spirit” (Hansen). Aparicio obviously recognizes this inevitable end to an athlete’s career, and addresses this topic when conversing with Guert while witnessing Henry walk off the field after losing his will to compete, “Doubt has always existed. Even for athletes” (Harbach, 328). Henry, however, does not understand this notion, as it is one of the opaque meanings of his favorite text he aspires to uncovering.²⁹ Pegram also recognizes that “self doubt and fear are two obstacles athletes must overcome on a regular basis” (Pegram, 98), while Henry does not. In a way, Henry’s troubles that unfold throughout the novel could have been avoided if he had comprehended the deeper meaning of the text.

²⁷ Morris, *Making the Team: The Cultural Work of Baseball Fiction*, 3-6.

²⁸ Pegram, “Archetypal Images in Young Adult Baseball Fiction, 1988-2007,” 21-22.

²⁹ Harbach, *The Art of Fielding*, 17.

After a thorough examination of Chad Harbach's *The Art of Fielding*, one is better able to understand why Billy Beane would find it difficult to not be romantic about baseball. The very nature of the game of baseball lends itself to themes of comradeship, a Homeric journey, the highs and lows of friendship, and even *Moby-Dick*, when used as a backdrop for a novel. While there are common archetypes evident through many baseball novels, Harbach's novel clashes with these expectations in order to represent his novel in a more realistic light. Harbach's novel acts as a warning to readers not to invest too much of themselves into their favorite novel as three of his main characters who do so, do not achieve their dreams. In Henry's case, this can be attributed to his problematic friendship with Mike Schwartz, who is positioned as a controlling Ahab figure in the novel. Their friendship also demonstrates the need for one to be their own person, as it is Henry's submission to Schwartz and his way of thinking that prevents him from reaching his dreams. This is shown both through his inability to live up to Aparicio's teaching and return to a "thoughtless being," but also leads to Henry seemingly choosing to forego his contract offer from the St. Louis Cardinals, thus resubmitting himself to Schwartz. When reading Harbach's novel, it is important to recognize the lessons he offers to the reader, which, in turn, argue for *The Art of Fielding* to be acknowledged as being more than *just* a baseball novel.

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