

As an English major, I'd like to think I can quickly, perhaps even skillfully, orient almost any library. Even though every academic paper and project I've written while at Radford has required some level of research on my part, usually completed in the library or using its various online tools, none necessitated quite so much as my senior thesis, a capstone requirement for all English majors.

I first read Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* for a class on the American Renaissance, a literary period concentrating on American writers from 1850 to 1855. I was warned by the professor that most students did not like Melville's most famous novel, but we'd all have to trudge through it regardless. I quickly found myself in the minority, struck not by the novel's headiness or obscurity but by its all-encompassing narrative. Melville's work is at once epic poem, encyclopedia, legal dictionary, romance, drama, historical account, travel log, and, of course, fiction. The great problem of the novel (if you actually want to consider it a problem) is not Captain Ahab's quest for the white whale but Ishmael's quest for determinacy in an indeterminate world. He continually refers to the whale as "unpainted" but seeks fruitlessly throughout the novel to name it, thereby giving it meaning. When it came time to pick a topic for my senior thesis, this impenetrable quality was an obvious choice.

While researching and writing my senior thesis, "'Unshored, Harborless Immensities': Cetology, Gender and Sexuality in *Moby-Dick*", I spent a considerable amount of time taking full advantage of McConnell Library. Mercifully, though not at all unexpected, McConnell houses a multitude of texts analyzing various aspects of Melville's seminal work in addition to a number of titles devoted to Melville himself and his role within the American Renaissance.

The problem of researching a work like *Moby-Dick* is the sheer volume of critical work on the text. In 1941, F. O. Matthiesson wrote what would become the definitive critical analysis of mid-nineteenth century American authors, including Herman Melville, until the 1980's. In order to have a full grasp of these later reactions, I had to first familiarize myself with the conventions Matthiesson developed and how they evolved until later critical schools, including Queer and Gender Studies, reexamined the text. When it came time to connect and make sense of all these converging approaches to *Moby-Dick*, the library proved most helpful.

A number of texts listed on my works cited were available at McConnell. I started simply enough, looking up "Moby-Dick" in the Library's online catalog and I left the library that afternoon with a formidable stack of books and a lot of work to do. In addition to gleaning information from earlier scholarly interpretations, I also worked backwards, looking at what more recent work referenced in order to focus my research. Part of the assignment required me to complete 20 annotations related to my thesis, not all of which made their way into my final paper. My next step made use of the library's extensive online journal database. Working mostly with JSTOR, Project Muse, and Thomas Gale, I ran queries requesting work on gender, sexuality, epistemology, and cetology (the study of whales) as it related to *Moby-Dick*. These searches yielded some of my most useful references and led me to the one book on my works cited not available in McConnell Library (in which I found two marvelous articles.) In the end, I was able to enter into the ongoing discussion of Herman Melville's definitive text (and one my by favorite books) in a way that left me with a sense of accomplishment as a scholar that I had not previously felt.

It is my intention to pursue a graduate degree after graduation and after the many hours I've logged in the library over the last four years, especially the time I spent researching my senior thesis, I think I'm fully prepared to enter into the more demanding academic sphere that graduate school will represent.