

## QUOTATION

### HERMANN MELVILLE ON STIMULUS DIMENSION CONTRAST

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In Chapter 42, “The Whiteness of the Whale,” Melville explains why Moby Dick’s white color controls fear responses in the sailors aboard the Pequod. Melville starts by establishing a contrast between Ishmael’s statement that, “It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me” (p. 178) and repeated examples of the cross-cultural use of the color white to indicate purity. An explanation for this seeming inconsistency is presented in the following passages:

Yet for all these accumulated associations, with whatever is sweet, and honorable, and sublime, there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood.

This elusive quality it is, which causes the thought of *whiteness, when divorced from more kindly associations, and coupled with any object terrible in itself, to heighten that terror to the furthest bounds* [italics added]. Witness the white bear of the poles, and the white shark of the tropics; what but their smooth, flaky whiteness makes them the transcendent horrors they are? That ghastly whiteness it is which imparts such an abhorrent mildness, even more loathsome than terrific, to the dumb gloating of their aspect. So that not the fierce-fanged tiger in his heraldic coat can so stagger courage as the white-shrouded bear or shark.\*

\*With reference to the Polar bear, it may possibly be urged by him who would fain go still deeper into this matter, that it is not the whiteness, separately regarded, which heightens the intolerable hideousness of that brute; for, analysed, that heightened hideousness, it might be said, only arises from the circumstance, that the irresponsible ferociousness of the creature stands invested in the fleece of celestial innocence and love; and hence, *by bringing together two such opposite emotions in our minds, the Polar bear frightens us with so unnatural a contrast* [italics added]. But even assuming all this to be true; yet, were it not for the whiteness, you would not have that intensified terror. (pp. 179–180)

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From: Melville, H. (1967). *Moby-Dick*. New York: Bantam Books. (Original work published 1851)

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