

Unlocking the Grand Quest of "Moby-Dick": From Obscurity to an American Epic

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Abstract

This paper explores the transformation of Herman Melville's "Moby-Dick" from its initial mixed reception in 1851 to its eventual recognition as an American epic and one of the greatest novels produced in the United States. It delves into the bafflement surrounding the novel's meaning and narrative methods as well as Melville's personal journey as an author. The influences of Shakespeare, Thomas Carlyle, and Melville's friendship with Nathaniel Hawthorne on the novel's development are examined.

The paper focuses on the character Ishmael, the novel's narrator, who embarks on a philosophical and psychological quest to understand the world and grapples with questions of free will, determinism, human identity, and destiny. Captain Ahab, an enigmatic and obsessive character, is central to the story and symbolizes cosmic evil, while the white whale, Moby Dick, represents existential blankness.

The narrative alternates between philosophical speculation and dramatic set pieces, leading to a climactic confrontation with Moby Dick. Ahab's relentless pursuit culminates in tragedy, and the novel concludes with essential questions about human existence left unanswered.

This study sheds light on the remarkable journey of "Moby-Dick" from obscurity to canonical status, highlighting its enduring significance in American literature and its timeless exploration of profound philosophical themes.

Keywords: Moby-Dick, Herman Melville, American literature, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ahab, symbolism, existentialism, tragic hero, Ishmael.

When *Moby-Dick* first appeared in 1851, its mixed reception was far from its eventual appreciation as an American epic and arguably the greatest novel America has yet produced. Bafflement about its meaning and methods is the dominant strain in the initial reviews in which *Moby-Dick* is described as an "odd book, professing to be a novel" and a "rhapsody run mad." Melville's unconventional medley of narrative forms—documentary, metaphysical, and dramatic—prompted the novel's first readers to scramble for a term to

contain its variety, including “an intellectual chowder of romance, philosophy, natural history, fine writing, good feeling, bad sayings,” and a “salmagundi of fact, fiction and philosophy.” Even a sympathetic reader such as George Henry Lewes, George Eliot’s common-law husband, who was fascinated by the book’s daring, found it “a strange, wild, weird book.” Revival of interest in Melville and his masterpiece began in earnest in the 1920s, long after the writer’s death in 1891 and too late to rescue Melville from the obscurity of his final years or to redeem a career that the author regarded as a failure. Despite being long out of print at the time of Melville’s death, with fewer than 3,000 copies sold during his lifetime, *Moby-Dick* has subsequently achieved canonical status, along with *The Scarlet Letter* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, as the essential 19th-century American novels. It is certainly the most writ-ten-about American novel, the interpretation and investigation of which, in the words of the critic Harry Levin, “might be said to have taken the place of whaling among the industries of New England.” Levin’s remark, made in the 1950s, is no less true today, although the *Moby-Dick* “industry” has now gone global, in pursuit of some of the grandest themes ever attempted in the novel and a delineation of a narrative strategy that challenged prior fictional assumptions and anticipated the experimental blending of forms that the literary modernists in the 20th century used to transform the novel’s methods.

When Melville began *Moby-Dick* in early 1850, he was a 30-year-old author of five previous novels, all of which had drawn on his brief sea voyage in 1839 and his extended time at sea from 1841 to 1844, spent on several ships and various locales ashore in the Pacific. His 18-month voyage aboard the American whaling ship *Acushnet* remained the one episode of his sea experience that he had not yet chronicled, and he proposed it as the subject to his English publisher, Richard Bentley, as “a romance of adventure, founded upon certain wild legends in the Southern Sperm Whale Fisheries, and illustrated by the author’s own personal experience, of two years & more, as a harpooner.” Although Melville misrepresented his whaling experience by promoting himself from seaman to harpooner, there is truth in his subsequent statement to Bentley that “I do not know that the subject treated of has ever been worked up by a romancer; or, indeed, by any writer, in any adequate manner.” Melville, at least initially, set out to document the American whaling industry based on his personal experience. After achieving some notoriety and financial success with his first two novels, *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), gaining him a reputation that he derided in 1851 as “the man who lived among the cannibals,” Melville ventured beyond a straightforward “narrative of facts” for romantic fancy and metaphysical speculation in *Mardi* (1849). The result baffled his dwindling audience, and Melville reluctantly returned to documentary narratives based on his first voyage to Liverpool in *Redburn* (1849) and his few weeks’ service in the U.S. Navy in *White-Jacket* (1850), dismissed by the writer as “two *jobs*, which I have done for money—being forced to it, as other men are to sawing wood.” Feeling constrained by the personal adventure-travel narrative from the self-expression and intellectual speculation that interested him, Melville took up his whaling story aware that “What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the *other way* I cannot.”

The factors influencing the personal departure, expansion, and deepening philosophical and psychological complexity of Melville's whaling tale include the author's extensive reading of Shakespeare, which contributed notably to the novel's poetic style and tragic resonance, and Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, a possible model for *Moby-Dick*'s combined philosophical and autobiographical narrative strategy. The greatest influence, however, on Melville's evolving masterpiece, based on the author's own estimation, was his friendship with Nathaniel Hawthorne, to whom *Moby-Dick* is dedicated. Having relocated to the Berkshires for the summer of 1850, Melville met Hawthorne for the first time in August at a picnic near Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Melville's nearly simultaneous first acquaintance with Hawthorne's writing was a revelation and an encouragement to undertake his own original and ambitious creation. As Melville acknowledged in his essay, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," written during this period, it was the "blackness in Hawthorne . . . that so fixes and fascinates me" in which the older writer "has dropped germinous seeds into my soul." Sustained by letters and meetings in which the two men engaged in sessions of "ontological heroics," in Melville's phrase, *Moby-Dick* grew in scale—as Ishmael reports, "To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme"—and darkened in tone as Ahab's pursuit of the white whale began to reflect a tragic human and philosophical quest after the "ungraspable phantom of life"

The reader's guide and interpreter of the symbolically expansive world of *Moby-Dick* is the novel's narrator, whose ambiguous introduction—"Call me Ishmael"—is arguably the most famous opening sentence in fiction. Ishmael, a former schoolmaster and a wanderer of philosophical temperament, has returned to the sea to relieve the "damp, drizzly November in my soul" and to restore his sense of the world and his place in it. There are actually two Ishmaels between whom the novel modulates: the innocent seaman uninitiated to the ways of whaling whose education and development are traced and the lone survivor of the Pequod's destruction, in which Ishmael recollects the events that in retrospect seem inevitably leading him and the crew to the "one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air." Ishmael's attempt to make sense of his experiences and the speculative testing of everything he encounters give the novel its peculiarly modern tone of indeterminacy as open-ended questions of free will and determinism, the source of human identity, purpose, and destiny, and what with any certainty can be known are debated. W. H. Auden remarked, that "the whole book is an elaborate synecdoche," in which the crew of the Pequod, their activities, and the anatomy of the whale from its head to tail are plumbed for their symbolic significance as the quest for Moby Dick takes on the expansive coloration of the epic heroic and intellectual quest.

Providing the tragic shape and momentum for Ishmael's attempt to understand and interpret his world is the "grand, ungodly, god-like man, Captain Ahab." With his massive, destructive ego, "a crucifixion in his face," and a tendency toward iambic pentameter, Ahab is one of fiction's most over-sized, suggestive characters, derived from Attic and Shakespearean tragedy and the brooding, romantic questers of Byron and Shelley. Like Ishmael, Ahab is driven to confront the significance of things, and, since his maiming by the white whale, "all

the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil” is embodied in Moby Dick, “the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them.” Ahab’s “wild vindictiveness against the whale” infects the crew through the magnetism of his will to join him in the hunt. Like Hawthorne and his scarlet letter, Melville thereby places at the center of his novel an endlessly suggestive central symbol in his albino rogue whale. For Ahab, Moby Dick personifies cosmic evil, a mask of the inscrutable “unknown but still reasoning thing”; for Ishmael the white whale points to an existential blankness, suggesting “the heartless voids and immensities of the universe . . . a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink.” Moby Dick becomes the measure by which all of the other crew members—Starbuck, Stubb, Flask, Pip, Fedallah, Queequeg, and others—reveal their characters, mirroring their (and mankind’s) fears and desires.

To prepare for the novel’s climactic confrontation with Moby Dick, Melville alternates philosophical speculation with dramatic tableaux. Ishmael’s introspective questioning of the nature of the whale and whaling is joined with theatrical set pieces, such as “The Quarter-Deck,” presented as if for the stage. Ishmael’s limited first-person perspective gives way to soliloquies and psychological omniscience, in violation of narrative decorum as the novel incorporates the methods of the epic and the tragic. The voyage of the Pequod is marked by nine encounters with other ships to offer various views on the white whale and the increasing desperation of Ahab’s pursuit. Eventually Melville reaches a symbolic crescendo in anticipation of the fateful sighting of the white whale in which all of human destiny, human nature, and the meaning of existence itself is bound up with Ahab’s quest.

Rejecting a final appeal by chief mate Starbuck to “fly these deadly waters! let us home,” Ahab condemns himself to his dark cause even against “all natural lovings and longings.” The white whale is finally sighted, and in the apocalyptic confrontation, Ahab, ship, and all the crew except Ishmael are destroyed with the frenzy of violence replaced by the tragic catharsis of pity and terror:

Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago.

Ishmael, kept afloat by his friend Queequeg’s coffin, is rescued, fated, like Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, to repeat his dark sea exploration of the inscrutable.

Melville’s “wicked book” that he claimed was “broiled in hell-fire” comes to rest on the final word “orphan,” suggestive of Ishmael’s and man-kind’s separation from ultimate answers to questions of origins, identity, and destiny. The novel, finally, is not about resolving the issues raised but framing essential questions for the reader to ponder. It is a facing down of the unfathomable and giving form to the ineffable. In summarizing his feeling to Hawthorne after completing his masterpiece, Melville stated that “I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb. . . . It is a strange feeling—no hopelessness is in it, no despair.

Content—that is it; and irresponsibility; but without licentious inclination. I speak now of my profoundest sense of being, not of an incidental feeling.” For the first and only time on such a scale in his career Melville had ventured as deeply as any novelist would ever go to probe existential questions, satisfied that he had unlocked significance in a creation, to borrow a phrase of F. Scott Fitzgerald from another great American myth, *The Great Gatsby*, “commensurate to his capacity for wonder.”

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