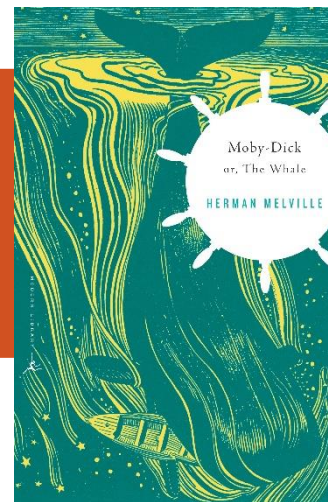




Moby Dick

Herman Melville



Author Background

Herman Melville, (1 August 1819 – 28 September 1891) was an American novelist, short-story writer, and poet, best known for his novels of the sea, including his masterpiece, *Moby Dick* (1851).

After trying several different jobs to support himself after the death of his father, in 1839 Melville took his first voyage across the Atlantic Sea as a cabin boy on the ship the *St. Lawrence*, the start of several years of seafaring adventures aboard merchant and whaling ships, exploring the French Polynesian islands. These experiences would satiate his desire for excitement and provide him with his material for his first three novels.

After a life with varied literary successes and failures (*Moby Dick* was not an acclaimed novel during his lifetime), marred by personal grief due to the loss of his sons and the pursuit of travel in an attempt to re-invigorate himself; Melville died of a heart attack while living in New York, the city of his birth.

Book Summary

A story of tribulation, beauty, and madness, *Moby Dick* famously begins with the narratorial invocation “Call me Ishmael.” The narrator is an outcast who turns to the sea for meaning, relaying to the audience the final voyage of the whaling vessel *Pequod*.

The ship’s captain is Ahab, who Ishmael and his friend Queequeg soon learn is losing his mind. Starbuck, Ahab’s first mate, recognizes this problem too, and is the only one throughout the novel to voice his disapproval of Ahab’s increasingly obsessive behaviour. Ahab is still recovering from an encounter with a large whale (the eponymous Moby Dick) that resulted in the loss of his leg.

The *Pequod* sets sail, and the crew is soon informed that this journey will be unlike their other whaling missions: this time, despite the reluctance of Starbuck, Ahab intends to hunt and kill the beastly Moby Dick - no matter the cost.

Discussion Questions

- ❖ Why does the book begin with "Call me Ishmael"? What relationship to the reader does this introduction establish?
- ❖ Is Ishmael a central or peripheral narrator? Is this novel about him, or is it about Captain Ahab? How can you tell?
- ❖ What roles do fate and prophecy play in shaping the ways *Moby Dick's* characters behave?
- ❖ What genre is *Moby Dick*? Epic? Tragedy? Quest-Romance? Can you defend one of these more convincingly than another?
- ❖ Is Ahab crazy? Or is his monomania justifiable because of his experiences with *Moby Dick*?
- ❖ Explore and explain the associations that Ishmael and others have toward the white whale.
- ❖ Why are there so few women in *Moby Dick*? What roles do these women play in the narrative?
- ❖ Why does Melville begin the novel by adhering to the conventions and limitations of a first-person narrator, but violate them later?
- ❖ What does this story tell us about the relationship between mankind and nature?
- ❖ Why do you think Ishmael is the sole survivor at the end of *Moby Dick*?
- ❖ "And some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher" (Ch. 99). This novel is full of symbols and allegory – describe one that intrigues you, and what you feel it represents.

References

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