

Moby Dick



Moby-Dick (the whale)

By: Herman Melville

HERMAN MELVILLE

(1819-1891), American

Herman Melville, born in 1819 in New York City, had a tough childhood after his family went broke. He worked different jobs and sailed on a whaling ship, which inspired his famous book Moby-Dick. He also wrote about his adventures in novels like Typee and Omoo. Nathaniel Hawthorne, another writer, encouraged him to explore deeper meanings in his writing. Despite Moby-Dick initially failing, Melville kept writing, including the well-known story "Bartleby the Scrivener." He died in 1891, not famous, but later, his works became widely admired.

Plot Overview

Ishmael wants to join a whaling ship and meets Queequeg, a harpooner, at an inn. They decide to join the Pequod, captained by Ahab, who's obsessed with hunting a white whale named Moby Dick. Ahab has a special crew to help him. They encounter other ships, like the Jeroboam with a crazed prophet, Gabriel, and the Samuel Enderby whose captain lost an arm to Moby Dick. Queequeg gets sick but recovers, using his coffin as a life buoy. Ahab predicts his death, which comes true during a battle with Moby Dick. The ship sinks, but Ishmael survives, floating on Queequeg's coffin until rescued by the Rachel.

Themes

The Limits of Knowledge

In "Moby-Dick," Ishmael tries to understand the whale's meaning through different ways like art and science, but fails. This shows that human knowledge

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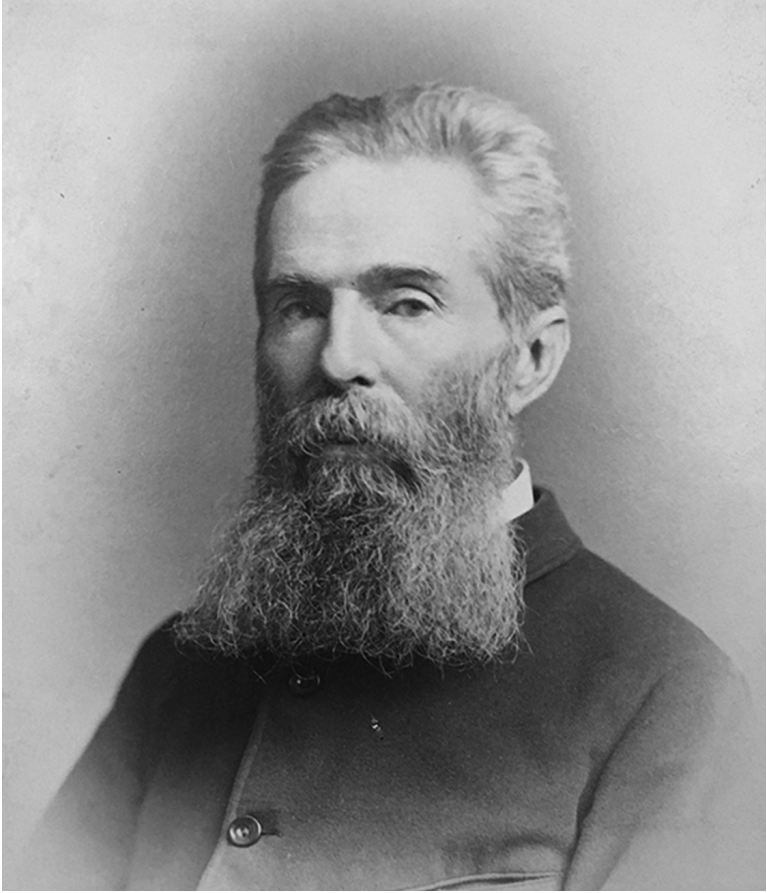
has limits. Moby Dick, like God, is mysterious and cannot be fully understood. Trying to interpret him, like Ahab does, can lead to danger because some things are beyond human understanding.

The Deceptiveness of Fate

In addition to highlighting many portentous or foreshadowing In “Moby-Dick,” fate seems inevitable, with many events hinting at the Pequod’s doom. Sailors believe in prophecies, but it’s suggested they may be deluding themselves. Ahab uses belief in fate to manipulate the crew into thinking their quest for Moby Dick is destiny. Fedallah’s prophecies are doubted when different people interpret signs differently, showing that humans see what they want in fate.

The Exploitative Nature of Whaling

In “Moby-Dick,” the Pequod appears equal and inclusive, with a diverse crew getting along. But beneath the surface, whaling is exploitative, mirroring other exploitative practices of American and European



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expansion. White mates depend on nonwhite harpooners and assign them dirty or dangerous tasks. Flask even uses his African harpooner, Daggoo, to gain advantage in hunting whales. Ahab's treatment of Pip as less valuable than a whale reflects the dehumanizing nature of whaling and exploitation.

Motifs

Whiteness

In "Moby-Dick," whiteness symbolizes the unnatural and threatening, contrary to its usual association with purity. Ishmael sees albinos, harsh environments, and crashing waves as examples of this. Whiteness represents both a lack of meaning and an overwhelming, unreadable excess of meaning. Moby Dick, the ultimate symbol of whiteness, is incomprehensible to the characters. Ahab sees it as evil, while Ishmael fails to scientifically understand its nature.

Surfaces and Depths

In "Moby-Dick," Ishmael reflects on the impossibility

of fully understanding things, as humans can only observe their surfaces. Even on a whale, only the outer layer is visible, and the depths of the sea remain mysterious. This motif highlights the limits of human knowledge and our inability to comprehend everything beyond surface appearances.

Symbols

The Pequod

In “Moby-Dick,” the Pequod symbolizes doom and death. Named after an extinct Native American tribe, it is painted black and adorned with whale bones, representing violent death. Like a primitive coffin, the Pequod becomes a symbol of impending doom for its crew.

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In “Moby-Dick,” Moby Dick symbolizes different things for different characters. For the crew, it represents their fears and anxieties about their dangerous jobs, allowing them to confront and manage their fear. Ahab

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sees Moby Dick as a manifestation of all that is wrong with the world and believes it's his destiny to destroy this symbolic evil.

Beyond individual interpretations, Moby Dick can also symbolize broader ideas. Its mysterious nature and silence can represent an unknowable God. As a profitable commodity, it reflects white economic expansion and exploitation in the 19th century. And as part of the natural world, it symbolizes the destruction of the environment due to human expansion.

Queequeg's Coffin

In "Moby-Dick," Queequeg's coffin symbolizes both life and death. Initially built when he's ill, it becomes a chest for his belongings when he recovers, symbolizing his will to live. Carved with his tattoos, it holds his knowledge. As the Pequod's life buoy, it symbolizes life in a morbid way. When the ship sinks, it saves Ishmael's life and the narrative he'll pass on.

Character List

Ishmael

The narrator of the novel and a junior member of the Pequod's crew. While not directly involved in major events, Ishmael provides extensive commentary on whales and whaling throughout the narrative.

Ahab

The egomaniacal captain of the Pequod who lost his leg to Moby Dick. Ahab is determined to kill the whale, using both charisma and intimidation to rally his crew. While dictatorial, he also displays moments of compassion, particularly towards the ship's cabin boy, Pip, and reflects on his family in Nantucket.

Moby Dick

The great white sperm whale, also known as the White Whale. Moby Dick is feared by sailors and regarded by Ahab as the embodiment of evil and his destined enemy.

Starbuck

The first mate of the Pequod who questions Ahab's decisions, particularly his obsession with Moby Dick. Starbuck is a Quaker who believes in interpreting the world through Christianity but does not force his beliefs on others. He serves as a conservative influence against Ahab's obsessive quest.

Queequeg

Starbuck's skilled harpooner and Ishmael's closest friend. Queequeg is a former prince from a South Sea island who stowed away on a whaling ship for adventure. He represents a blend of African, Polynesian, Islamic, Christian, and Native American cultures. Brave and generous, Queequeg teaches Ishmael that a man's character is not defined by race.

Stubb

The second mate of the Pequod known for his mischievous good humor. Stubb is easygoing and well-

liked among the crew. He exhibits a somewhat nihilistic outlook, trusting in fate and avoiding assigning too much significance to things.

Tashtego

Stubb's harpooner, Tashtego, is a Gay Head Indian from Martha's Vineyard, representing one of the last members of a disappearing tribe. He performs skilled tasks on the ship, such as tapping the case of spermaceti in a whale's head. Tashtego, like Queequeg, challenges racial stereotypes and embodies characteristics of the "noble savage." However, he is more practical and less intellectual than Queequeg, and like many sailors, he enjoys rum.

Flask

A native of Tisbury on Martha's Vineyard and the third mate of the Pequod. Flask is short and stocky with a confrontational attitude and lacks reverence for anything. Due to his stature, he is nicknamed "King-Post," resembling a short, square timber.

Daggoo

Flask's harpooner, Daggoo, is a physically enormous and imperious-looking African. Similar to Queequeg, he stowed away on a whaling ship that stopped near his home. Daggoo is less prominently featured in the narrative compared to Queequeg or Tashtego.

Pip

Pip is a young black boy serving as a cabin boy or jester on the Pequod. Initially, he has a minor role, but he becomes significant when he goes insane after being left adrift at sea. Similar to fools in Shakespeare's plays, Pip is part idiot and part prophet, often perceiving things others don't.

Fedallah

Fedallah is a strange old Parsee, a Persian fire-worshipper, secretly brought on board by Ahab. He has a striking appearance, wearing a turban made from his own hair and a black Chinese jacket and pants.

Fedallah is an exceptionally skilled hunter and serves as a prophet to Ahab. He keeps his distance from the rest of the crew, who view him with unease.

Peleg

Peleg is a wealthy retired whale man from Nantucket and a Quaker. As one of the principal owners of the Pequod, he, along with Captain Bildad, oversees the hiring of the crew. During negotiations for wages with Ishmael and Queequeg, Peleg presents himself as generous, though his salary offer is not particularly impressive.

Bildad

Bildad is another wealthy Quaker ex-whale man from Nantucket who owns a significant share of the Pequod. In negotiations over wages, Bildad presents himself as crustier than Peleg. Both men exhibit a business sense and a level of bloodthirstiness uncommon for Quakers, who typically adhere to pacifism.

Father Mapple

Father Mapple is a former whale man turned preacher at the New Bedford Whale man's Chapel. He delivers a sermon on Jonah and the whale, using the Bible to speak to the lives of the whale men. Learned and experienced, Father Mapple serves as an example of someone whose trials have led him towards God rather than bitterness or revenge.

Captain Boomer

Captain Boomer is the cheerful captain of the English whaling ship, the Samuel Enderby. He lost his arm in an accident involving Moby Dick. Unlike Ahab, Boomer is grateful to have survived and believes further pursuit of the whale is madness. He serves as a foil for Ahab, as their reactions to a similar experience differ greatly.

Gabriel

Gabriel is a sailor aboard the Jeroboam and part of a Shaker sect. He prophesies that Moby Dick is the

incarnation of the Shaker god and that any attempts to harm him will lead to disaster. His prophecies are confirmed by the death of the Jeroboam's mate during a whale hunt and the plague that sweeps through the ship.

Chapter 1

The Carpet-Bag

The narrative of Moby-Dick begins with the famous brief sentence, “Call me Ishmael.” Ishmael, a sailor, describes a typical scene in New York City, with large groups of men gathering on their days off to contemplate the ocean and dream of a life at sea. He explains that he himself went to sea because, like these men, he was feeling a “damp, drizzly November in [his] soul” and craved adventure. Shunning anything too “respectable” (or expensive), he always ships as a common sailor rather than as a passenger.

Ishmael travels from New York to New Bedford, Massachusetts, the whaling capital of the United States. He arrives too late to catch the ferry to Nantucket, the original whaling center of New England; for the sake of tradition, Ishmael wants to sail in a Nantucket whaler. For now, however, he has to spend a few nights in New Bedford. He roams the streets looking for an inn, but

those that he finds seem too expensive. He stumbles into, then quickly out of, a church full of wailing and weeping African Americans, where a sermon is being preached on “the blackness of darkness.” Ishmael finally wanders into the Spouter-Inn, owned by Peter Coffin. The ominous name of the inn and the owner satisfy his mood, and the place is dilapidated and sure to be cheap.

Inside the Spouter-Inn, Ishmael finds a large, somewhat inscrutable oil painting, which he finally determines to be a depiction of a whale attacking a ship. On the other wall is a collection of “monstrous clubs and spears.” Because the inn is nearly full, Ishmael learns that he will have to share a room with “a dark complexioned” harpooner named Queequeg. He passes the evening in the bar with “a wild set of mariners,” waiting for Queequeg to arrive. Out of apprehension, Ishmael decides that he would rather sleep on a bench than share a bed with some strange, possibly dangerous

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man. The bench is too uncomfortable, though, and Ishmael decides to put up with the unknown harpooner, who, Coffin had assured him, is perfectly fine because “he pays reg’lar.” Still, Ishmael is worried, since Coffin adds that the harpooner has recently arrived from the South Seas and is currently out peddling shrunken heads. When Queequeg finally returns, the frightened Ishmael watches him from the bed, noting with horror the harpooner’s tattoos and tomahawk pipe. Queequeg sets up and worships a small, dark-colored idol. His prayers over, he discovers Ishmael in his bed. He flourishes the tomahawk pipe as Ishmael shouts for the inn’s owner. After Coffin explains the situation, Ishmael and Queequeg settle in for the night, Ishmael

having decided that it is better to share a bed with a “sober cannibal” than a “drunken Christian.”

When Queequeg and Ishmael wake up the next morning, Queequeg’s arm lies affectionately thrown over Ishmael, as if the latter were “his wife.” Ishmael

watches the cannibal don a fancy hat and boots and shave himself with his harpoon. He marvels at the “savage’s understanding of civilized manners.”

The Spouter-Inn’s breakfast table is filled with whalers, yet the meal, to Ishmael’s surprise, is not enlivened with sea stories or bawdiness. Instead, the men eat in silence. Queequeg uses his harpoon to help himself to more meat.

Ishmael wanders about New Bedford, marveling at the town and its people. Because of the maritime industry centered here, the town is full of men from all corners of the globe, from the South Pacific to the remote mountains of Vermont. The great mansions and finely dressed women of the town all exist thanks to the high prices that whale oil commands.

Ishmael finds the Whale man’s Chapel, which contains plaques commemorating those lost or killed at sea. He ponders the contradictory message inherent in the chapel: if heaven really is a better place, it doesn’t

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make sense for a dead man's friends and relatives to mourn him so inconsolably. Ishmael is surprised to find Queequeg in the chapel.

A man arrives at the chapel and climbs up a rope ladder into the pulpit, which is shaped like a ship's bow. He is Father Mapple, the preacher in this chapel, a favorite among whale men for his sincerity and ability to make his sermons relevant to their lives. Ishmael wonders about the symbolic significance of Mapple's dramatic climb into the pulpit.

Mapple takes his theme for this Sunday's sermon from the story of Jonah, the prophet swallowed by "a great fish"—in other words, a whale. Mapple, typically, uses Jonah's story to preach about man's sin and his willful disobeying of God's commandments. But, Mapple claims, the story also speaks to him personally, urging him to fulfill God's will by "preaching the Truth in the face of Falsehood!" Drained by his emotional sermon, Mapple ends kneeling, his hands covering his face, as the crowd files out.

Open-ended questions:

1. How does Ishmael's decision to share a bed with Queequeg reflect his attitude towards cultural differences and prejudices?
2. What role does the Spouter-Inn play in setting the tone for the rest of the novel, particularly in terms of foreshadowing?

Complete the following sentence with gaps:

1. Queequeg's and appearance initially unsettle Ishmael, but he comes to appreciate Queequeg's and
2. Ishmael's decision to share a bed with Queequeg at the Spouter-Inn reflects his willingness to embrace and overcome

Comment on Quotations in short:

1. What is the significance of Ishmael's statement, "Call me Ishmael," in the opening of the novel?

2. How does Ishmael's observation, "Better to sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian," reflect his attitude towards cultural differences?

Discuss in short:

1. Discuss the portrayal of cultural diversity in the characters of Ishmael and Queequeg, and how their relationship challenges societal norms.
2. How does the setting of the Spouter-Inn contribute to the atmosphere of the novel and foreshadow events to come?
3. Analyze the themes of sin, repentance, and divine will as presented in Father Mapple's sermon on Jonah.