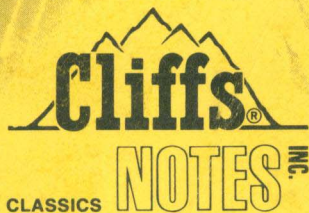


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**MELVILLE'S MOBY DICK**



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# MOBY-DICK

## NOTES

including

- *Life and Times of Herman Melville*
- *Introduction*
- *List of Characters*
- *Synopsis*
- *Chapter Summaries and Commentaries*
- *Critical Analysis*
- *Character Analyses*
- *Questions for Examination and Review*
- *Selected Bibliography*

by

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## HERMAN MELVILLE

### A SKETCH OF HIS LIFE AND TIMES

Herman Melville was born in 1819, the son of Allan and Maria Melville. He was one of a family of eight children—four boys and four girls—who lived during his childhood in comfortable circumstances in the “right” neighborhoods of New York City, and was descended from colonial families.

Herman idolized his father but there is some evidence that while he loved his mother, her strict Calvinist Presbyterian sense of proper behavior in her children aroused in the rebellious-spirited Herman a conflict that was never resolved.

This became all the more significant in 1830 when his father’s business failed. Herman, then on the verge of adolescence, suffered great tragedy when his father, unable to cope with the strain of debts and misfortune, died shortly afterward. For the next seven years life was uneven for the Melville family as they received varying degrees of support from relatives. After a short stint in a business house in New York City, Herman resolved to go to sea.

He signed on as a “boy” on the British ship the *St. Lawrence* and sailed with her across the Atlantic to Liverpool and on the return voyage to America. While life as a sailor was harsh, his thirst for the sea was not quenched. He immediately signed on a whale ship the *Acushnet*, which made the long voyage around South America and into the Pacific. The ship finally dropped anchor at a beautiful isle of the Marquesas. The filth of the ship, the wretched crew, and the brutality of the officers caused Melville and a companion to desert and flee into the interior of the island. Inadvertently they came upon a group of cannibals; fortunately the cannibals “adopted” the two white men, but refused to let them return to the harbor. His companion, Toby Greene, finally escaped. Melville remained, and, in many respects, admired the simple and peaceful life of the natives. But despite the pleasures, Melville became restless and successfully escaped to an Australian whaling ship, the *Lucy Ann*, which was no better than the *Acushnet*. When it landed at Tahiti young Melville again deserted, this time with the ship’s “doctor,” named Long Ghost. After a pleasant stay among the tribesmen, Melville sailed to Hawaii on a Nantucket whaler called the *Charles and Henry*. In Hawaii he signed on as a seaman on the U.S. man-of-war, the frigate *United States*. Melville was outraged by the floggings administered to the seamen. When the ship finally arrived in Boston in 1844, Melville obtained his release. His days at sea were forever ended.



He turned to writing. In 1846 *Typee* (a novel based on his life with the cannibals) appeared. In 1847, *Omoo* (a novel based on his life in Tahiti) was published. In 1848, *Redburn* (a novel based on his first voyage to England and return) was published. In 1850, *White-Jacket*, a strong protest against flogging in the U.S. Navy, appeared, and ultimately was to influence the abolition of this practice by an act of Congress. All were great successes and his popularity as a writer rose rapidly.

Meanwhile, in 1847, Melville had married Elizabeth "Lizzie" Shaw, a childhood friend and a daughter of a prominent New England judge. They moved from Pittsfield, where he had been living with his mother and two sisters, to New York.

In July, 1851, Melville—after 16 months of strenuous writing—completed *Moby Dick*. This was at a time when Melville not only had to support his wife and family, but his mother and two of his three sisters. He was sinking hopelessly into debt not only to his publishers but to his father-in-law. In 1852 he published *Pierre*. He then sought without success an appointment to public office. A nervous breakdown followed and in 1856, his worried family secured funds to send him on a rest journey to the Holy Land and Europe, just after he had completed work on another book, *The Confidence Man*. When he returned to America he was in much better spirits.

In 1863 he sold his inland home in the Berkshires of New York and returned to New York City and its view and smell of the sea. His long search for a government job was finally rewarded with a menial job in the customs house in New York in 1866.

Herman Melville's career as a writer began with *Typee* and when he returned from Palestine he said he had forsaken all thoughts of ever writing again. But this was not quite true. *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*, a long narrative poem, was published in 1876. In the spring of 1891, a few months before his death in New York City, he completed the manuscript of *Billy Budd*, written in memory of a seaman, Jack Chase, whom he had known on the frigate *United States*, and one of Melville's few acknowledged friends.

Melville died quietly on September 28, 1891. For nearly the last thirty years of his life he had tried desperately to remain obscure in New York City, hidden from the world of letters.



This great American author lived in an exciting time in the history of his country and an inspiring time in the history of its literature.

During his life span America made its great geographic leap westward from the Ohio valley to the Pacific coast. The nation emerged from a colonial existence on the eastern seaboard to become a strong nation whose ideals and durability were severely tested by a civil war. These were the times of great material progress—the railroads, the telegraph, the sewing machine, the telephone, and many other inventions which helped a growing nation develop its commerce. It was a stirring time for social progress.

In literature, during Melville's early and most productive years, American writers were turning from the period of the Revolution to a period of romanticism, democracy, and the Civil War. Among the literary giants were Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, Edgar Allan Poe, Oliver Wendell Holmes and John Greenleaf Whittier.

It was a time when the nation sought unity and the democracy so hard won in the Revolution. Yet it was a time when American writers had not completely severed their literary heritage from Europe, partly because there were literary giants flourishing there—Tolstoy, Dumas, Hugo, Ibsen, Thackeray, and others.

One final footnote to Melville's life. Of all these great figures in American literature, Melville was attracted to only one—Hawthorne.

They met for the first time in August, 1850, and their friendship deepened and flourished until November, 1851, when Hawthorne left the Berkshires for New York. After that they saw each other only twice, the last time as Melville stopped in England (where Hawthorne was a consul) while en route to the Holy Land.

One of the few kind words from literary people of the time about *Moby Dick* came from Hawthorne, and Melville was obviously deeply touched. But the record indicates that a friendship between these two men required their living as close neighbors. The friendship waned as letters failed to fulfill their mutual needs, and the loss of Hawthorne's friendship was a blow from which Melville never recovered.



## INTRODUCTION

The meaning of *Moby Dick* is so involved and complex that few critics would agree upon a single accepted interpretation. The novel can be approached from a multiplicity of viewpoints; thus, it would be highly superficial to attempt to suggest one basic meaning and we therefore offer only one approach to the novel.

Many critics suggest that Melville is handling the idea of the duality of meaning in the universe as opposed to man's desire to see only one meaning in any one thing. Melville suggests that every event and every object has a multiplicity of meanings in the same way that the entire creation has many varied meanings. To support this idea, Melville shows us the difference between the vision of the whale and the vision of man: man's eyes are so located that he is forever focusing in upon one object and seeing only that object. On the other hand, the whale's eyes are on opposite sides of his head and at any given moment, the whale will see two images. Consequently, Melville uses the chapters on whaling to suggest that this monstrous animal might represent the duality of the universe and that man is the monistic animal in nature. That is, God created the universe with an infinity of meaning and man is forever settling upon one specific meaning. As Father Mapple says, to obey God we must deny ourselves, in other words, we must deny that tendency in ourselves to attach one meaning to anything.

Melville supports this idea with many motifs, only one being the coffin—life-buoy motif. Here is an object which constantly shifts in its meaning and significance. At first it is a coffin for Queequeg, then he has it made in the form of a canoe, later, when Queequeg recovers, he makes it into first a storage chest and then into a primitive work of art and religion. It is later converted into a life-buoy and is the object by which Ishmael's life is saved. Thus, man cannot assign one meaning to this object. The meaning of any object, Melville suggests, lies in the beholder of the object and not in the object itself.

Ahab's monomania is seen then in his determination to view the White Whale as the symbol of all the evil of the universe. He is not allowing for the multiplicity of meaning to be found throughout the world. This determination then leads him into his fatal error. As Ishmael suggests in the chapter on the whiteness of the whale, the color white can mean so many various and opposing things that it would be dangerous to settle upon any one single meaning and *Moby Dick* was a symbol of all the things in the universe rather than any specific one.



Another general idea found in the novel is the comradeship between men. Ahab functions as an isolated man. Ishmael, however, welcomes the comradeship of all human beings. Young Pip is destroyed when he is left totally isolated upon the wide expanses of the sea.

Note also the varying interpretations given to the sea. It is the source of life and represents the difficulty of understanding life, it symbolizes the terrors which man must encounter throughout his journey in life and also the only way by which man can come to a fuller understanding of life.

The above ideas are only a few of the approaches which can lead the reader into *Moby Dick*. Part of the greatness of the novel lives in the fact that no amount of discussion ends the possibility of additional meanings and as Melville would finally suggest, the meaning of *Moby Dick* lies not in the book itself, but in the reader.

## LIST OF CHARACTERS IN *MOBY-DICK*

### *Ahab*

The one-legged Captain of the *Pequod* who has sworn death for Moby Dick, the gigantic white whale who crippled him.

### *Ishmael*

The narrator of the story who ships out on the *Pequod* as a simple seaman.

### *Starbuck*

The first mate aboard the *Pequod* who adheres to the strict Christian view of life.

### *Stubb*

The second mate who is concerned mainly with having a good time.

### *Flask*

The third mate who is characterized by his mediocrity.

### *Queequeg*

One of the harpooners who forms a friendship with Ishmael.

### *Tashtego*

Another of the harpooners, descended from Indians.



**Daggoo**

The third harpooner, descended from African tribes.

**Fedallah**

The Parsee who becomes Ahab's personal harpooner.

**Peleg and Bildad**

Co-owners of the *Pequod*.

**Father Mapple**

The minister who preaches in the Whaleman's chapel.

**Elijah**

A strange man who prophesies doom for the *Pequod*.

**Fleece**

The cook aboard the *Pequod* who preaches a sermon to the sharks.

**Pip**

The Negro cabin boy who loses his mind when abandoned temporarily in the sea.

**Perth**

The blacksmith who forges Ahab's harpoon.

**Gabriel**

The mad prophet aboard the *Jeroboam*.

**Mayhew**

Captain of the *Jeroboam*.

**Radney**

The brutal first mate aboard the *Town-Ho* who is killed by Moby Dick.

**Steelkilt**

A seaman aboard the *Town-Ho* who is persecuted by Radney.

**SYNOPSIS OF MOBY-DICK**

We hear the story of Moby Dick from the lips of a man who, at the very beginning of the story, says simply, "Call me Ishmael." Ishmael, an



inlander of Massachusetts, succumbs to the urge to go to sea, not as a passenger nor as an officer, both of which roles he disdains, but as an ordinary seaman. There is the life!

One cold and wet December day he enters, a carpet bag on his shoulder, the shipping port of New Bedford, and finds a room at Spouter Inn. He shares his bed, at first in great consternation, with a massive South Sea Islander named Queequeg.

Queequeg is a heathen, and an expert harpooner on whaling ships. The next day a driving storm forces Ishmael to seek shelter in the Whalemen's Chapel, a cold and austere place. Soon the pastor, Father Mapple, enters and, tossing off his greatcoat, climbs a rope ladder to the pulpit situated high above his listeners.

Father Mapple's stirring sermon is upon Jonah and the Whale. Father Mapple exhorts his hearers to deny sin and to uphold the truth. But above all, the true delight of life and great achievement of man comes when he acknowledges no law, no force, but the Lord his God.

Ishmael and Queequeg become fast friends. The time arrives to leave New Bedford, cross the short expanse of sea to Nantucket, where together they will search out a whaling ship. On the packet boat en route to Nantucket a foolish landlubber, who had been making fun of Queequeg's strange blank-and-tattoo coloring, is accidentally plunged into the icy water. Only Queequeg, of all aboard ship, dives into the sea and rescues him. They secure a room that evening in Nantucket, and the next day Ishmael, after carefully looking over the whaling ships being fitted for several years at sea, chooses the *Pequod*. When the ship's owners are told of Queequeg, and subsequently see him, they gladly sign him on also. Good harpooners are scarce.

The captain of the ship, they are told, is Ahab. Because of some vague illness he is confined to his cabin. A strange old wisp of a man later confronts Queequeg and Ishmael and alludes darkly and ominously to Captain Ahab and the *Pequod*.

On Christmas morning, a cold grey day, as Ishmael and Queequeg approach the ship, they see several dark figures scurry aboard. Shortly the *Pequod* sets sail upon a wind-swept Atlantic. Now, says Ishmael, the world of the *Pequod* is surrounded by the mysterious sea.

Ishmael introduces us to Starbuck, the chief mate, Stubb, the second mate, and Flask, the third mate; and their harpooners who are, respectively,



Queequeg, Tashtego, and Daggoo. As the ship enters warmer air, some days after leaving Nantucket, Ishmael catches his first glimpse of Ahab, captain of the *Pequod*, standing on the afterdeck, his white peg leg anchored in a hole bored into the deck floor. A shiver of terror comes over Ishmael.

The focus is shifted momentarily from the crew to whales as Ishmael describes the various types. He points out that the most prized of all is the sperm whale, which yields valuable spermaceti oil which lights the lamps of the world and is also essential for perfume and other products. Ishmael also explains how the officers and seamen are housed and fed in opposite ends of the ship, and how whales are sighted by sailors called "lookouts" who perch precariously from the mast and, when they sight the sperm whale blowing mist from his spout in the distance, sing out, "There she blows!"

The crew is commanded to come before Ahab and there he tells them that the sole purpose of the *Pequod's* voyage is to hunt down the Great White Whale, which some crew members instantly recognize as Moby Dick. Ahab confesses his deep, burning, tormenting desire to strike back at the creature who took his leg from him. The crew excitedly accepts the challenge flung at them by Ahab and they all drink a pledge to it. The wine casks are opened and the crew revels through the night, drinking and shouting and singing.

And who is Moby Dick? Ishmael learns from the crew that he is a larger-than-usual sperm whale with a peculiar snow-white forehead, a deformed lower jaw, and a malicious temper which drives him to madness when attacked. No other whale approaches the evil of Moby Dick. Indeed, Ishmael offers affidavits that the enraged sperm whale, such as Moby Dick, has the power to ram and sink a whaling ship!

Night after night, day after day, Ahab pores over the charts of the world's seas, plotting a course which he hopes will take him to Moby Dick. Meanwhile the crew sights its first sperm whales as the lookout sings out, "There she blows!" The whale boats are lowered from the *Pequod*. At this moment Ishmael discovers that the mysterious dark figures who slipped aboard the ship the morning of sailing are East Indians who man the oars and tiller of Ahab's boat. In the wild excitement of the first chase Ishmael's boat capsizes. When it is rescued from the water he realizes the crew finds humor in this reckless adventure.

In a later lowering, Little Pip, a Negro, is tossed from a boat and presumably left to die. Although he is finally rescued by the *Pequod*, this harrowing experience turns Pip into an idiot.



The *Pequod* continues voyaging relentlessly through the South Atlantic, then the Indian Ocean and on the way captures, kills, dissects and extracts oil from the sperm whales. Ships are met, and on each occasion the gab-fest or "gam" opens with Ahab's stern demand, "Hast seen the White Whale?"

The suspense of the chase for Moby Dick steadily heightens as the *Pequod* enters the Japanese sea, the area in which the White Whale is most likely to be found.

Then one day the *Pequod* meets the whaling ship *Enderby*, whose captain shows Ahab that he has lost his arm very recently to the White Whale. Ahab rushes back to his ship and in the process splinters his ivory leg. The carpenter and blacksmith hurriedly fashion a new one, and Ahab has a new harpoon fashioned from the finest iron.

The *Pequod*, now in full sail, enters the vast depths and expanse of the Pacific Ocean. Despite the efforts of Starbuck and Stubb to abandon the mad chase, the *Pequod* plunges ahead.

Suddenly a fierce typhoon descends upon the *Pequod*. The ship's sails are ripped by the raging winds, her decks washed by mountainous waves. The three main mast tips suddenly spout fire casting an eerie glow over the ship. Still Ahab urges the vessel forward. He becomes increasingly impatient—devising a new compass when the storm ruins the regular ship's compass.

The storm subsides and the *Pequod* meets the whaling ship *Rachel*, which had encountered Moby Dick and lost a whale boat bearing a crew including the captain's son. Ahab ignores the *Rachel's* plea to help search for the lost boat.

The tempo of the chase increases. At long last, the Great White Whale—Moby Dick—is sighted by Ahab.

The first day harpoons are driven into Moby Dick but the furious whale smashes Ahab's boat. All the whalers are rescued, but Moby Dick escapes.

The second day the harpoons of all three boats find their mark in Moby Dick's huge sides and again Ahab's boat is capsized. But all hands are rescued save the Parsee, Fedallah.



The third day Ahab drives a harpoon into Moby Dick's side. Two of the boats, in danger, are ordered back to the *Pequod*. Ahab's boat remains alone to fight the whale. The angered Moby Dick drives his forehead into the side of the *Pequod*, splintering its bow. Ahab throws another harpoon into Moby Dick, but its rope catches Ahab about the neck and drags him into the depths. The *Pequod* sinks.

Only Ishmael survives. He is rescued by the *Rachel*.

## CHAPTER I

### LOOMINGS

#### *Summary*

Ishmael, the narrator of the story, tells the reader that when he or any person becomes bored or depressed, he will seek to buoy his spirits by visiting an ocean or, if he is an inlander, a lake or stream. One can often see men sitting on the shore of some water gazing pensively at the water and trying to restore peace to their troubled minds.

Ishmael explains that he never goes to sea as a passenger nor as a "Commodore, or a Captain, or a Cook," instead, he prefers to go as a "simple sailor." He has never minded being ordered about because he knows that everyone in the world is a slave to someone or to something else. Thus, he likes to go to sea as a simple sailor because he does not have to pay as do passengers; instead, he is paid. Also, the exercise he gets is quite wholesome and pure, but chief among his desires to go to sea is his curiosity about the giant whale. "Such a portentous and mysterious monster roused all" his curiosity. And finally, he goes because he is "tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote."

#### *Commentary*

Ishmael, the narrator of the story, discusses his reasons for going to sea. One of the dominant ideas throughout *Moby Dick* is that there are a number of reasons for almost any occurrence in the universe and man will never be able to comprehend them all. Throughout the book, Ishmael will function as a person who will attempt to understand several reasons and several interpretations for any specific act whereas other characters will assign one reason for an act. For example, we will later see that Ahab has the definite view that Moby Dick represents evil whereas Ishmael will see Moby Dick as representing many different things.



Later, we find that Starbuck goes to the sea only to make money from catching whales while Stubb goes for the excitement of the whale hunt, and Ahab has gone specifically to hunt for the White Whale. However, in this first chapter, Ishmael suggests various reasons why he goes to the sea. Among these reasons are his desire to get away from the land, to return to the sea which is the source of life, to find peace and to find a wholesome environment, to seek out things "everlastingly remote," and to see the giant whale. This suggests that Ishmael is the most comprehensive man who will be sailing. He will be the only one who will attempt to see and understand *all* aspects of life.

This first chapter also introduces the idea of the ocean as the source of life. It is only by returning periodically to it that man can keep in contact with things of ultimate value. The ocean represents the very essence of life and stands as a contrast to the land where man is involved in so many trivial activities that he never has an opportunity to confront the essentials of life itself. Ishmael suggests that various primitive tribes and various religions have always looked upon the sea as something mysterious and deep. It is "the image of the ungraspable phantom of life" where man can see into the truth of all things.

One of the difficulties in reading *Moby Dick* is that Melville does not state his ideas in definite clear-cut statements. Most of his meaning is seen through metaphorical statements and will be elaborated upon as the novel progresses. The idea of the ocean being the essence of life will later be expanded and modified by various incidents in the action of the novel.

This first chapter also introduces the idea of man's position in the universe. No matter how important man may become, there is someone who is always superior to him. Later in the novel, Ahab cries out that he would like to be a completely free man and curses the idea that he is always indebted to something else. Thus, this dominant motif is here introduced and will become central to the novel later on.

Finally, another important motif is introduced: Ishmael mentions that he always goes to sea when he finds himself "involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral." The reader should remember that Ishmael, at the end of the novel is saved from drowning by floating on a coffin which had been converted into a life buoy.

## CHAPTER II

### THE CARPET-BAG

#### *Summary*

Ishmael stuffs "a shirt or two in my old carpet bag," quits his good old home town of Manhatto and soon arrives in the famous port of New Bedford



on a cold, windy, and icy Saturday night in December. But he does not plan to sail from New Bedford, but rather from Nantucket, and in a Nantucket ship, because that was the original great sailing port of America. But when he arrives at New Bedford, the little packet which would ferry him to Nantucket has already sailed so he is obliged to spend a night, a day, and another night in New Bedford.

He starts to look for a place to eat and sleep. Finally he passes a sign on an inn called "The Crossed Harpoons" but it looks too expensive. He passes another, "Sword-Fish Inn," but this one looks too expensive also.

Moving on, Ishmael comes to a dim sort of light near the docks. The sign over the door says: "The Spouter Inn: – Peter Coffin." Ishmael thinks the house so dim, and the place so dilapidated looking, that perhaps he can afford to stay there. What a terrible place, Ishmael muses, yet it is better to be inside than face the icy teeth of the cold winter wind. He decides to enter and investigate the "Spouter."

### *Commentary*

Ishmael's search for an appropriate dwelling place for the night suggests his larger quest for man's position in the universe. The name of the inn—"The Spouter-Inn: – Peter Coffin"—reminds us both of the whaling industry and of the coffin motif discussed in the last chapter. Later in the novel, we find out that the spout of the whale will become symbolic of all the doubt of the universe, and here in the inn, Ishmael is in serious doubt about his roommate for the night.

Melville's technique throughout much of the novel is here illustrated in some seemingly insignificant passages. For example, Melville seems to be describing the Spouter-Inn when he says: "What a pity they didn't stop up the chinks and the crannies though, and thrust in a little lint here and there. But it's too late to make any improvements now. The universe is finished; the copestone is on, and the chips were carted off a million years ago." In such descriptions, the reader should be aware that Melville is writing in metaphors. That is, in this passage, he is suggesting something of the condition of man and something about man's incertitude in the universe.

## CHAPTER III

### THE SPOUTER-INN

#### *Summary*

Ishmael enters the Spouter-Inn. On one wall of the entryway hangs a large oil painting, covered with grime. Although the light is poor Ishmael is