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Herman Melville's MOBY DICK

Laurence MacPhee

赫尔曼·梅尔维尔的

白鲸

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CONTENTS

目 录

英文部分

*	Introduction	1
*	Brief Summary of <i>Moby Dick</i>	7
*	Etymology and Extracts	12
*	Detailed Summary of <i>Moby Dick</i>	13
*	Character Analyses	140
*	Critical Commentary	148
*	Essay Questions and Answers for Review	153
*	Bibliography and Guide to Further Research	160

中文部分

*	作者介绍.....	167
*	《白鲸》内容简介.....	172
*	词源和选段.....	176
*	《白鲸》梗概.....	177
*	人物分析.....	283
*	评论综述.....	289

INTRODUCTION

MELVILLE'S LIFE. Herman Melville was born in New York City on August 1, 1819, to Allan Melvill (as his father spelled his name) and Maria Gansevoort Melvill. Both sides of the family were quite well off, and could even be called "aristocratic" in a sense; his father came from a line of successful merchants, and his mother from Hudson Valley landholders. His childhood was a secure and comfortable one, but his fortunes changed in 1830, when his father suffered serious business losses. In January, 1832, Allan Melvill died, mentally and physically exhausted. Melville had idolized his father, and his death was a profound shock. For several years thereafter, the family was in a financial twilight, never destitute but never secure.

During this difficult period, Melville's family moved upstate in New York, to a little town near Troy. His education was spotty; he attended the Albany Classical School for a time, but during these formative years he had no consistent schooling. His mother, a rather domineering woman, became even more overbearing after her husband's death, and her influence (combined with the strict Calvinism of the Dutch Reformed Church, to which she belonged) seems to have inspired in Melville some of the religious skepticism and rebelliousness that runs under the surface of *Moby Dick* and others of his works. Melville developed in his mature years a feeling that no profound mind could overlook a sense of fateful imperfection in life (one senses this attitude frequently in *Moby Dick*), which was probably the result of the very strong Calvinistic idea of original sin.

When eighteen years old, he took a job as a schoolmaster at a remote school near Pittsfield, Massachusetts (where his uncle's family lived). Then, in the summer of 1839, he signed up as a "boy" on a British merchant ship, the *St. Lawrence*, and went on a round-trip voyage to Liverpool—a voyage which he used as the basis for his fourth book, *Redburn* (1849). This trip began for the young Melville a period of almost five years of travelling around the world that gave him the material for his first several books, including *Moby Dick*.

Upon returning to the United States after the *St. Lawrence* voyage, Melville again taught school for a while, but evidently he had developed a love for the sea. For in January, 1841, he signed on the whaler *Acushnet* for a trip to the South Seas. Life aboard the whaler repelled Melville, however, and in July, 1842, he and another seaman, Richard Greene ("Toby" in the novel *Typee*) deserted ship at the Marquesas Islands. He lived for a month with a cannibal tribe which treated him well but would not let him go. Then he escaped on an Australian whaler, the *Lucy Ann*, which he abandoned at Tahiti. There he worked for a time as a field laborer, and eventually left on another whaler, the Nantucket ship *Charles and Henry*, which arrived at the Hawaiian Islands in April, 1843. The adventures of these months in the Marquesas and Tahiti were the materials out of which Melville later shaped *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847). At Hawaii Melville signed up as a seaman on an American warship, the *United States*, which returned him to America. He was dismissed in October of 1844, and returned home to begin writing.

He published *Typee* and *Omoo*, and then, in 1849, a book called *Mardi*, a confused and difficult allegorical novel which repelled many of the readers who had so enjoyed his first two books. (*Mardi*

is today often considered the first in a trilogy which also includes *Moby Dick* and *Pierre*.) Later in 1849 came the above-mentioned *Redburn*, and in 1850 Melville published *White-Jacket*, a book based on his experiences on the man-of-war *United States*. These first five books won him considerable reputation (which he later repudiated; in a letter to Hawthorne he ironically lamented that he seemed doomed to be accepted only as "a man who had lived among the cannibals"). He became a member of the influential New York literary group led by the Duyckinck brothers, and for a time was lionized. In 1849 he travelled to England to arrange for foreign publication of his works, and in 1850 he moved to a farmhouse near Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where he lived for the next thirteen years with his wife (Elizabeth Shaw, whom he married in 1847) and children.

During his first year at his home, which he named "Arrowhead," Melville met Nathaniel Hawthorne, and the two men, sensing that they had much in common, struck up a friendship. It was a singularly fortunate association for Melville, even though it was a truly personal one only for about two years. He read Hawthorne's works avidly, and was given encouragement by Hawthorne's interest precisely during the period in which he was writing his masterpiece, *Moby Dick*. As a result of his high esteem for Hawthorne, Melville dedicated *Moby Dick* to him when it appeared in late 1851.

The critical reaction to *Moby Dick* was mixed, but tended to be negative, especially as time passed. That Melville himself seems to have felt that the book had failed is clear from his next novel, *Pierre* (1852), an iconoclastic book which angrily attacks, among other things, publishing practices. *Pierre*, like *Moby Dick*, embodies a quest for truth, but it was condemned as obscure, and its use of incest and suicide caused it to be attacked as immoral as well. Melville's

reputation was by this time definitely on the decline. In the next several years, he produced *Israel Potter* (1855), *The Piazza Tales* (1855), and *The Confidence-Man* (1857), an extremely interesting but difficult moral allegory which takes place on a Mississippi River steamboat.

He fell more and more in debt during these years, and in 1856, suffering from what would be called a nervous breakdown today, went on a tour of the Holy Land which restored him from his state of mental exhaustion.

In 1863 he sold his home and moved to New York City, and in 1866, after years of seeking a government job, he finally secured a minor position in the New York customs house. The same year he published *Battle Pieces and Aspects of the War* (the best poetry on the American Civil War except for Whitman's *Drum Taps*). Ten years later, in 1876, he published *Clarel*, a long, reflective narrative poem about the problems of religious faith. Two more books of poems were published in his lifetime: *John Marr and Other Sailors* (1888) and *Timoleon* (1891). These last three volumes of poetry were privately financed and printed in small editions. Melville finished the manuscript of *Billy Budd* in 1891, but this work was not published until 1924. He died on September 28, 1891, so completely obscure that many were surprised to discover that he had not been dead for years.

A NOTE ON MELVILLE'S ERA Historical material on nineteenth-century America is superabundant, so no general historical sketch will be attempted here. However, a few general points should be kept in mind about the first half of the century as one reads *Moby Dick*:

1. This was a period of tremendous national *optimism*. The United States was a young, robust, growing country, which had definitely asserted its independence by triumphing in the War of 1812. The country felt no strong sense of limitation; the sense of tragedy seemed missing in the national life (this sense was to be restored to some extent by the Civil War). Melville is one of the few major writers who runs counter to this optimistic attitude; *Moby Dick* in particular suggests hidden terrors and incomprehensible tragedy and fatalism in life.

2. It was an era of *expansion*. The great West opened up, especially with the California gold rush in 1849. Americans were ready to fight over a dispute concerning Oregon's border. Horace Greeley's famous dictate, "Go west, young man," was ringing in all ears. The voyage of the *Pequod* represents, in a way, this spirit of expansion—the American whaling fleet was sweeping the seven seas, and sweeping all competition before it. Only here and there was there a question mark to hint that expansion might be attended with certain evils—the Kansas-Nebraska border wars, for example, or the dangers which necessitated the Missouri Compromise.

3. This was an era of radical *individualism*. The American prided himself on his nation's independence, and even more on his personal independence. The scout, the frontiersman, the settler, and later on the business entrepreneur and the "self-made man," all gave momentum to the concept that "rugged individualism" was almost exclusively an American trait. Looked at from one angle, Captain Ahab is a study of Ralph Waldo Emerson's doctrine of "self-reliance" gone wild.

4. This period placed a high value on *industriousness*. Industry was

starting to become the American way of life, and “industry”—hard work—was the key to success for every self-made man. The whale-ship is a kind of great machine. Perhaps Melville is suggesting that an attempt to subdue nature through technology can be dangerous, or that too much “industry” aimed at no particular human goal tends to dehumanize men.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF *MOBY DICK*

Moby Dick is told to us by a man who identifies himself only as Ishmael. Impelled by an urge to see more of the world and understand more of its mysteries, Ishmael decides to go to sea. He leaves New York and travels to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where he spends a night with a South Seas cannibal named Queequeg as a roommate. At first frightened by Queequeg, Ishmael soon finds him likeable enough.

While at New Bedford, Ishmael goes to a famous whaleman's chapel whose pastor, Father Mapple, is widely known in the whaling fleet. Father Mapple preaches a sermon which focuses on the story of Jonah and the whale, in which he emphasizes that man must reject his own pride and be true to God, letting no other force guide him. Ishmael and Queequeg become fast friends at New Bedford, and decide to go to Nantucket Island and sign on the same whaleship together. They take a packet boat, and on the trip to Nantucket, Queequeg saves an obnoxious lout from drowning in the icy waters. (This is the first of a number of scenes in which men are saved from drowning.) At Nantucket, Queequeg tells Ishmael that his god has decided that Ishmael must choose the ship on which they will sail, and Ishmael chooses the *Pequod* because it is so picturesque. Both men sign on, and are told that the ship's captain is Ahab, an unusual man but one who "has his humanities." He is confined at his home because of some mysterious sickness, so Ishmael cannot see him. As Ishmael and Queequeg leave the ship they are accosted by a queer old man who drops dark hints about Ahab.

The ship sails on a cold, gray Christmas day. As the two men approach the *Pequod*, they see a group of shadowy figures board the ship before them. The ship plunges out into the Atlantic and for many days nothing is seen of Ahab. Ishmael presents the three mates, Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask, then the harpooners, and then describes the crew in general. The ship sails down the Atlantic into a warmer climate, and Ahab finally makes an appearance. As time passes, Ahab appears more frequently, usually standing in one of two holes drilled on the quarter-deck for his peg leg of whalebone. A scene between Ahab and the second mate, Stubb, shows that something is disturbing Ahab profoundly.

Ishmael tells us something of whales, categorizing them according to size and type, and showing why he considers the sperm whale the noblest of all. He also begins to give us what proves ultimately to be an immense amount of information about whales, whaling, whale-ships, and whalemén. Then comes the first “big scene” of the book—Ahab calls all the crew onto the quarter-deck, and tells them that he has sworn to hunt to the death the great whale, Moby Dick, that ripped his leg off on his last voyage. He inflames the crew so that except for Starbuck, the first mate, they are all eager to pursue Moby Dick; and he nails a gold doubloon to the mainmast, promising it as a reward for the first man to sight Moby Dick on the voyage.

Ishmael sets himself to find out as much as he can about this whale, and discovers that, besides being unusually large and deformed in certain ways, Moby Dick has a savage temper which has led him to destroy many a whaleboat and kill a number of seamen. He is so ferocious that he seems, unlike ordinary whales, to know what he is doing, and to destroy boats and men with conscious malice. Most

frightening of his characteristics, however, is his whiteness, which is mysterious.

As the *Pequod* moves down the South Atlantic, around the Cape of Good Hope, and across the Indian Ocean, Ahab spends night after night with his charts and maps, tracing on them courses on which he might stand the best chance of meeting Moby Dick. Ishmael continues to fill us in on details of whales and whaling. Several times whales are sighted and chased; at the first lowering it is discovered that Ahab has a special boat crew, led by a Satanic Oriental named Fedallah—this stowaway boat crew explains the mysterious figures Ishmael saw when boarding the ship. The *Pequod* also meets or has significant contact with nine other vessels in the course of the voyage (the *Goney*, *Town-Ho*, *Jeroboam*, *Jungfrau*, *Bouton-de-rose*, *Samuel Enderby*, *Bachelor*, *Rachel*, and *Delight*). Each one of these ships, by contrast or parallel to the *Pequod*, gives us new information or a slightly different attitude toward Ahab's ship and his quest. And along with all this, we get Ishmael's constant reflections as the philosophical narrator continually examines his experiences and tries to fathom what they mean and where they are leading.

As the *Pequod* sails across the Pacific, Ahab becomes ever more intense in his desire to destroy Moby Dick. He asks each one of the ships he encounters, "Hast seen the White Whale?" but it is only when he sails the ship down to the equator that he finally meets a ship which has seen Moby Dick. In the meantime, Pip, a little Negro youth, has been temporarily abandoned in the sea, and has lost his mind before being saved by the ship. Touched by Pip's plight, Ahab has taken special care of him, keeping him in his cabin. Pip begs Ahab several times to abandon his quest for the White Whale, but Ahab, though deeply moved, continues the search.

The suspense of the hunt builds throughout several weeks. The ship meets the *Samuel Enderby*, whose captain has recently lost his arm to Moby Dick. Ahab cracks his ivory leg leaving the *Enderby*, and must have a new one made by the ship's carpenter. The *Pequod* runs into a typhoon, during which the mastheads glow with a mysterious electrical fire. In a weird ritual, Ahab claims to be a son of the fire and lightning, and challenges nature to do its worst to him. Finally the ship meets two whalers, the *Rachel* and the *Delight*, which have just had battles with Moby Dick. Despite dire warnings, Ahab presses the chase furiously, and the tension mounts. One last quiet day dawns; Starbuck tries his utmost to convince Ahab that the quest is folly, but Ahab feels that his acts have been foreordained since eternity, and cannot turn back. On the following day Ahab himself sights Moby Dick, thus (ironically) gaining his own promised reward.

The first day the boats approach Moby Dick, but he dives and, coming up under Ahab's boat, bites it in half. The *Pequod* sails up, drives the whale off, and picks up all its boats; then the ship follows the whale. On the second day, all three whaleboats get harpoons into Moby Dick, but he fights furiously; two boats are smashed and Ahab's is overturned. All are saved except Fedallah (who has predicted that Ahab's death would be preceded by certain signs, among which was to be Fedallah's own death).

On the third day Ahab harpoons the whale, but is left to fight him alone when the other two boats, damaged, are forced to return to the *Pequod*. Moby Dick breaks loose from Ahab's boat, turns, and dashes his immense forehead into the *Pequod's* bow. The crushed boat sinks. As it settles, Ahab darts one last harpoon into Moby Dick, but the line catches him around the neck and he is dragged down into

the sea. The vortex created by the sinking ship pulls down everything except one lone survivor—Ishmael. He is rescued by the *Rachel*, which is still cruising the area looking for survivors from its previous encounter with Moby Dick. And the sea rolls on as it did thousands of years ago.

ETYMOLOGY AND EXTRACTS

Melville prefaces *Moby Dick* with a brief list of the words for "whale" in thirteen different languages. Then he adds a list of "Extracts"—brief excerpts—from various references to whales found in literature all over the world. The list embraces references ranging in time from the *Old Testament* to Melville's contemporaries, and it is drawn from plays, whaling manuals and histories, poetry, essays, books of morality, political writings, grammar-school textbooks, songs, and even a missionary's journal. There are no fewer than eighty of these "Extracts."

COMMENT: Melville has compiled an extraordinary—and extremely long—list of remarks about the whale here. Why? Because he wishes to impress the reader immediately with the fact that the whale has been known in all lands and at all times. He wants us to realize that the interest which he shows in this gigantic creature is by no means original with him, and that the whale has, since time immemorial, been a symbol of the powerful and mysterious forces of nature. He may also be trying to overwhelm the reader for "effect."

DETAILED SUMMARY OF *MOBY DICK*

CHAPTER I

LOOMINGS

"Call me Ishmael." With these three words, the narrator of *Moby Dick* introduces himself rather mysteriously to the reader, and begins what is probably the greatest sea-story ever written. Ishmael, a landsman (one who is not habitually a sailor) from New York, tells us that "some years ago—never mind how long precisely" he decided to go to sea to drive away a feeling of melancholy and moodiness. This is his way of forgetting the difficulties of life ashore. Let other men commit suicide if they can't face their troubles, but Ishmael will go to sea when, as he puts it, he finds himself "involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral" he meets.

There is nothing unusual about the urge to sail the ocean, Ishmael assures us. Look at the wharves of Manhattan on Sunday afternoon, and you will see thousands of men staring out to sea. Even the island of Manhattan itself is surrounded by water, and its streets lead the stroller toward the water. If we leave Manhattan and go to the country, we still find that water mysteriously attracts men. A country path, in a region of lakes, leads to a pool or stream. The artist painting a landscape includes a stream in his picture. The visitor to the prairies is disappointed because there is no water there. In ancient times, the Greeks and Persians regarded the seas with reverence. (In other words, at all times and in all places, the sea has exercised a strange fascination for the human race.)

COMMENT: Two important factors are introduced immedi-

ately in the opening paragraph:

1) The name "Ishmael" is very significant. Ishmael, in the *Bible*, was the son of Abraham and a slave woman, Hagar. Sarah, Abraham's wife, insisted that he abandon Hagar and Ishmael, and Ishmael became an outcast. The name is therefore symbolic of the wanderer or displaced person. As we will see many times, Ishmael not only wanders over the world, but is wandering spiritually in search of the meaning of life.

2) Ishmael tells us that the actual events of the story took place years ago—so that many of the comments he makes will refer to things which he couldn't really understand when they first occurred. He is wiser "now" than he was when he took the voyage.

In discussing the ways in which water fascinates men, Ishmael is preparing us for the mysteries of the sea which we will encounter as the voyage unfolds. The voyage is in a sense the voyage or journey of life, and the dreams of water which Ishmael thinks haunt most men suggest the great "sea" of life, which the ocean, with all its wonders, represents in this novel.

When Ishmael goes to sea, he never travels as a passenger, because he usually has no money. On the other hand, he wants no part of the duties and responsibilities of being an officer, for it is difficult enough simply to take care of himself when he is out on the ocean. He chooses to ship out as a common sailor, because he gets paid for his work and because the work he does is healthy and fairly active. True enough, he may be ordered around by a dictatorial officer—this is an experience that is very trying for a proud man—but he can stand be-