

**BEN'S NOTES**

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**MOBY-  
DICK**

**BY HERMAN MELVILLE**



**Third  
Thursday**  
Book Club

# HERMAN MELVILLE'S *MOBY-DICK*

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*<sup>1</sup> is sometimes considered the Great American Novel. Its often-riveting action scenes, its labyrinthine structure, its Shakespearean dialogue and characterizations – these make *Moby-Dick* a work of kaleidoscopic complexity. Purportedly an adventure story about a young man seeking his fortune aboard a doomed whaling vessel, *Moby-Dick* is actually an investigation into the nature of man, God, and nature itself. Ahab, the fiery captain of the *Pequod*, is one of the most iconic characters in all of literature: a God-seeking man, wronged by nature, determined to pierce through the veil of base reality and get at the deeper stuff. Is *Moby-Dick* about the dangers of monomaniacal leadership? The evils of religious fervor? The tragedy of being human? Or all of these?

## HERMAN MELVILLE: A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Herman Melville was born in New York on August 1, 1819. His father was an importer and merchant, and Melville's early childhood was unimpeded by poverty. His father, Allan, described Herman as “backward in speech and somewhat slow in comprehension” but “both solid and profound” where he did understand.<sup>2</sup> But by the time of his father's death in 1832, the family's fortunes had waned. To help the family financially, Melville began clerking at a bank; meanwhile, he studied classic literature at school. In 1839, at the age of 20 and at his now-bankrupt older brother's behest, Melville signed aboard as cabin boy for a merchant ship, the *St. Lawrence*. This was to be only the first of Melville's voyages.

His journeys to the South Seas made far more of an impression on him than his first voyage. He learned a love for the native people, including the Typees who would become the chief subject of his first wildly successful novel, *Typee* (1846), about his experiences in French Polynesia. The glare of his harsh judgment fell mostly on so-called civilized people who targeted the so-called savages:

*They [the natives] esteem us, with rare exceptions, such as some of the missionaries, the most barbarous, treacherous, irreligious, and devilish creatures on the earth. This may*

*of course be a mere prejudice of those unlettered savages, for have not our traders always treated them with brotherly affection? Who has ever heard of a vessel sustaining the honor of a Christian flag and the spirit of the Christian Gospel by opening its batteries in indiscriminate massacre upon some poor little village on the seaside – splattering the torn bamboo huts with blood and brains of women and children, defenseless and innocent?*

Melville concluded that the “result of civilization, at the Sandwich Islands and elsewhere, is found productive to the civilizers, destructive to the civilized.”<sup>3</sup>

More of Melville’s seafaring adventures, including involvement in a failed mutiny, found their way into his second novel, *Omoo* (1847). That same year, Melville married Elizabeth Shaw, a member of a prominent Massachusetts family. He wrote more books over the succeeding years, but his larger development as an author was shaped more by review of Shakespeare and his newfound friendship with Nathaniel Hawthorne, author of *The Scarlet Letter*.

In 1851, Melville published *Moby-Dick*. Melville truly labored on *Moby-Dick*. He wrote to author Richard Henry Dana, Jr. that the book would be “a strange sort of a book ... the poetry runs as hard as sap from a frozen maple tree;—& to cook the thing up, one must needs throw in a little fancy, which from the nature of the thing, must be ungainly as the gambols of the whales themselves. Yet I mean to give the truth of the thing, spite of this.”<sup>4</sup>

The book was a critical and commercial failure.

In 1852, Melville published *Pierre*, which puzzled critics and was yet another failure.

The last novel Melville published was *The Confidence-Man* (1857), another bizarrely confusing text rife with cynicism about America.

Melville spent the rest of his life writing shorter work, largely uncelebrated. His last novel, *Billy Budd*, was completed in 1891 but wasn’t published until 1924, long after his death. When he died in 1891, he died largely unnoticed.

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