

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Moby-Dick, or, The Whale

by

Herman Melville

Book Information

Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, or, The Whale

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This American epic tells a tale about a captain of a whaleship and his obsession to catch the whale named Moby Dick.

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Main Characters

Captain Ahab the captain of the Nantucket whaler "Pequod," who pursues Moby Dick with a monomania seemingly beyond his own control

Fedallah a mysterious Parsee brought aboard the "Pequod" as one of Ahab's own crew, who holds mysterious power over the captain and foretells his death

Flask the third mate of the "Pequod"

Ishmael the narrator of the story, a young man making his first whaling voyage and the only survivor of the "Pequod"

Perth the ship's blacksmith

Queequeg a "pagan" harpooner who befriends Ishmael

Starbuck the first mate of the "Pequod," an upright Quaker who vainly seeks to dissuade Ahab from fulfilling his vow of vengeance against Moby Dick

Stubb the second mate of the "Pequod," a seasoned whaler

Vocabulary

ambergris a waxy material found in the intestines of dead or diseased sperm whales used in perfume-making

apotheosis transformation into a god

brit small, floating marine organisms that serve as a major food source for whales

cetology the study of whales and related animals

gam a meeting of whaling ships at sea in which information is exchanged and sailors socialize

Leviathan used in this book to refer to whales, the word is derived from a sea monster mentioned in the Old Testament

pagan one who does not worship the God of Israel; not a Christian, Jew, or Moslem

spermaceti a white, waxy material obtained from the head of a sperm whale and used for fuel, candle-making, and ointments

stave or stove(past tense) a verb meaning to make a hole from the outside, as to "stave in" a boat

try-works a kiln-like structure set on the deck of a whaling ship and used to process blubber

Synopsis

As the story opens, the narrator, Ishmael, has just arrived in New Bedford, Massachusetts, a bustling whaling port of the mid-nineteenth century. He feels compelled to try his hand at whaling and soon meets an unlikely companion who will share his experience. Queequeg is a "pagan" South-Sea islander and an experienced whaling harpooner. The two strike up a friendship and decide to ship out together aboard the Nantucket whaling ship "Pequod," to be commanded by the notorious Captain Ahab.

After the ship leaves Nantucket, Ahab is not seen for some days. When he does appear, he calls together the crew and explains his true purpose in taking this command: he seeks revenge on the "White Whale," Moby Dick, the sperm whale that sliced off his leg in a seemingly deliberate and sinister attack. Ahab's forceful presence is overwhelming to both the officers and the crew, and they willingly join in a bizarre ceremony that seals their pledge to avenge Ahab. The three harpooners seal their vow by drinking rum from the sockets of their harpoons.

The ship takes a course around the Cape of Good

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Hope and the Indian Ocean, occasionally stopping to pursue a sperm whale other than the one that is the object of their quest. Ishmael provides the reader with details about the operation of the ship, the nature of the whale, the techniques of whale hunting, and the steps involved in processing the whale carcass. During the first "lowering" of the whale boats to pursue a whale, a strange crew appears, apparently hand-picked by Ahab to man his whale boat. With their leader, the mysterious Parsee, Fedallah, they row the captain close to the action.

The journey continues, and the "Pequod" encounters several other whaling ships. The first words from Ahab to the captains of these vessels are: "Hast seen the White Whale?" As the ship approaches the equatorial sperm-whale hunting grounds in the Pacific Ocean, several of these ships report encounters with Moby Dick. Ahab's obsession grows as he approaches the place where the White Whale is likely to be encountered, eventually rigging a sling for himself in which he watches for the whale from his own place on the mast. With him throughout this vigil is Fedallah, who foretells the events related to Ahab's death. The upright Starbuck tries to persuade Ahab to turn homeward, but Ahab replies that he is under the influence of a force that will not allow it.

In the end, Fedallah's prophecies transpire, as he himself is seen on the third day of the hunt, dead and entangled by ropes with the body of the White Whale. Ahab is killed as his harpoon rope catches him about the neck and wrenches him into the sea. Finally, Moby Dick, maliciously and consciously, it seems, attacks the "Pequod" itself, and it goes down with all hands.

In a short epilogue, Ishmael reveals that he was the only survivor of the wreck, having ironically clung to a coffin rigged as a life buoy.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

One of the most intense scenes in *Moby Dick* takes place aboard the "Pequod" during the typhoon. As lightning lights the tips of the three masts, Ahab rails against the "clear spirit of clear fire," after which the tip of his harpoon glows with fire. Reread this striking passage in the chapter entitled, "The Candles." What effect does this event have on the crew of the "Pequod"?

The superstitious crew members, pagan and Christian alike, are disturbed by the apparent power Ahab displays when he calls upon his "fiery father" and the harpoon burns "like a serpent's tongue." They panic and rush away, agreeing with Starbuck that God seems to be against them. They are frightened into submission by Ahab when Ahab brandishes the harpoon and reminds them of their oaths to hunt Moby Dick.

Literary Analysis

The author uses the encounters with other whaling ships to develop the character of the ships and their crew and provide information about the White Whale, Moby Dick. The names of these ships appear to hold significance in themselves. Review the names and the stories associated with each of the "gams" in which the "Pequod" engaged. What is the meaning or irony expressed?

In some cases, such as that of the "Delight," the name evokes a bitter irony. The "Delight" had just lost five crew members and was about to bury a man at sea as the "Pequod" looked on. In other cases, such as the "Bachelor" and the "Virgin," the names are indicative of the state of their fortunes. The "Bachelor" was festive, full of whale oil and headed home, while the German ship, "Virgin," was empty of oil and inept at the business of whaling.

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Inferential Comprehension

In what way does Starbuck's character serve as a counterpoint to Ahab's madness over the course of the story?

Starbuck, the upright Quaker, tries to dissuade Ahab from his vengeful pursuit of Moby Dick. Early in the story, he is the only one of the crew and officers who expresses strong reservations to Ahab about the true purpose of his journey. As the conflict with Moby Dick looms near, Starbuck finds himself unable to stand up to Ahab's force of personality and later falters when he has a chance to take Ahab's musket and end the captain's life. Ahab understands Starbuck's character and actually trusts him. The two share a poignant moment when Starbuck pleads with Ahab to return to his young family in Nantucket. Still, Ahab decides to meet his destiny with the White Whale.

Constructing Meaning

Throughout the novel, Herman Melville's writing often verges on the poetic. In one example, Ahab, musing to himself in an early chapter entitled "Sunset," says, "I leave a white and turbid wake; pale waters, paler cheeks, where'er I sail." What is the meaning of this passage?

In this chapter, Ahab is presiding over the ceremony in which the crew pledges allegiance to his plan to pursue the White Whale. He is likely considering what the future held for this crew, whom he so easily manipulates. Ahab approaches his search for the White Whale with a sense of destiny and inevitability. The "pale waters, paler cheeks" likely refer to the lives and fortunes of those innocents he heedlessly incorporates into his plans.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization Ahab is one of the most powerful antagonists in American literature. Ahab knows his purpose is evil, but feels a force compelling him to press on to a final showdown with the White Whale. Initiate a classroom discussion in which the motivations of antagonists from other novels are considered.

Does the author provide an "excuse" for the misdeeds of the antagonist? Does the author allow for a transformation in the antagonist during the course of the book? How does Ahab show himself to be the "grand, ungodly, god-like man" described to Ishmael?

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors *Moby Dick* is an intense, allegorical novel, but it also provides meticulous details about the whaling industry, the nature of the sperm whale, and life aboard a sperm-whale fishing boat. To help students place the story in historical perspective, ask them to research the New England whaling industry of the mid-nineteenth century, with particular emphasis on the factors that ended the search for spermaceti in large quantities. Ask students to write a short essay on their findings.

Understanding Dialogue Many of the characters in *Moby Dick* speak in an archaic manner typified by the King James Version of the Bible and apparently adopted by Starbuck and other Quakers of Nantucket as part of their everyday speech. As an exercise in appreciating an author's use of such speech patterns, assign students to write a short exchange of dialogue, perhaps an everyday dinner-table conversation, written in the manner of Ahab and Starbuck.

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning *Moby Dick* abounds with allusions to stories and figures in Roman and Greek mythology. A student of literature can gain significant understanding of literature by becoming familiar with mythological legends. Take as an example Melville's allusion to Prometheus, comparing him to the carpenter who was preparing a new leg for Ahab. Ask students to research the myth of Prometheus. Initiate a classroom discussion in which students discuss the traits of Prometheus and the meaning of Melville's comparison.