



*'Melville's lyricism, so redolent of Shakespeare's, thrives on the four elements. He blends Scripture and the sea, the music of the waves and the heavenly bodies, the poetry of the everyday and a grandeur of Atlantic proportions.'*

**ALBERT CAMUS**

*'I think that the book which I put down with the unqualified thought "I wish I had written that" is Moby Dick.'*

**WILLIAM FAULKNER**

*'I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb.'* **HERMAN MELVILLE**

# The Moby-Dick Reading Group at the Rosenbach

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September 16<sup>th</sup> : Etymology—Ch. 23, "The Lee Shore": Backgrounds biographical, cultural and political

An introduction to Melville's early life and career, his involvement with the Young America movement, and the political context in 1850 for his drafting of *Moby-Dick* will precede our discussion of the opening chapters of the novel. Participants are encouraged to look over one of the biographies of Melville listed below (Elizabeth Hardwick's is perhaps the most accessible) and/or to explore one of the following earlier novels: *Typee: Peep at Polynesian*, Melville's first novel based on his experiences living with the Typee, a cannibal tribe in the Marquesas Islands, or *Life or Redburn: His First Voyage*, Melville's fourth novel based on his first voyage from New York to Liverpool and back. Both are as much travel narratives as they are novels and bear resemblance to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and the picaresque novels of authors like Henry Fielding and Tobias Smollet.

October 21<sup>st</sup> : Ch. 24, "The Advocate"—Ch. 42, "The Whiteness of the Whale": Romantic, theological and existential themes

In addition to discussing the next twenty or so chapters of the novel, we will begin with a discussion of how Melville's aesthetic sensibilities were influenced by the romantic movement in England and America. In addition to Thomas Carlyle and Mary Shelley, Melville's conception of Ahab's quest shows the influence of a wide range of romantic writers including Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, among others. For Melville, the questions raised by romanticism were as much theological as they were psychological and political, and in exploring the theological implications of romantic individualism, he approaches an existentialism that anticipates the concerns of later modernist writers.

November 18<sup>th</sup> : Ch. 43, "Hark!" —Ch. 60, "The Line": 365 Ways of Looking at a Whale

*Moby-Dick* is a work that has inspired numerous artists in a range of different mediums, including film, sculpture, music, and painting. While our focus will be on the next group of chapters we will be reading, we will also take time to examine art work Melville alludes to in the novel, as well as art work inspired by the novel. This may also be the session in which we examine materials from the Rosenbach collection of Melville associated volumes and manuscripts.

December 16th : Ch. 61, "Stubb kills a Whale"—Ch. 86, "The Tail": "Cannibal old me":  
Individualism and Community aboard the *Pequod*

Melville's novel is deeply responsive to the tensions in American society between our individual freedom and our obligation to others. Ahab's quest for revenge is pursued at the expense of the crew's well-being. This conflict is central to the novel and informed by the political tensions in 1850 America that were caused by industrialization, slavery, and westward expansion. To what extent does the novel sustain an ideal of democratic community in readers' imagination is a question worth considering as we move through the middle chapters of the novel.

January 20<sup>th</sup> : Ch. 87, "The Grand Armada"—Ch. 114, "The Gilder": Skeptical Relativism as Aesthetic Principle

As the novel moves toward its conclusion, Melville consciously replays the major themes by narrating Ahab's encounters with a number of major and minor characters, including Pip, Starbuck, the ship's carpenter and the ship's blacksmith. Each of these encounters may prompt readers to engage in a kind of skeptical questioning that mirrors the metaphysical, psychological and theological questioning that continues to drive Ahab on in his quest to kill the white whale. This intellectual searching is central to the aesthetic pleasure of reading *Moby-Dick* and so we will spend some time examining how Melville's interest in such "deep diving" is informed by his reading of authors like Michel de Montaigne, Pierre Bayle, Sir Thomas Browne and William Shakespeare.

February 17<sup>th</sup> : Ch. 112 "The Blacksmith"—Epilogue: Apocalyptic endings and the future of America

The end of *Moby-Dick* is deliberately prophetic and somewhat obscure. Although Melville claimed that he did not want *Moby-Dick* to be "a hideous and intolerable allegory," the novel's conclusion is deliberately symbolic and demands a kind of allegorical interpretation. While discussing the novel's final chapters, we will also consider how it has been interpreted as a political allegory and what relevance it may still have to contemporary American culture.



Required Text:

*Moby-Dick*, Norton Critical Edition, second edition, ed. Hershel Parker. ISBN: 0393972836

Suggested Biographies (choose one to browse)

Andrew Delbanco, *Melville, His World and Work* (Random House, 2006)

A very well received biography, Delbanco judiciously examines Melville's major works over the course of his career. The most recent biography it is occasionally marred by references to contemporary culture that have no real bearing on Melville's life as writer.

Elizabeth Hardwick, *Herman Melville* (Penguin, 2000).

Part of the Penguin Lives series, Hardwick's biography is an accessible and short (approx. 150 pages). In many ways it is the biography most

Hershel Parker, *Melville: A Biography* (2 volumes, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, 2002)

Widely recognized as the definitive biography, this two volume account of Melville's life and career attempts to take into account every extant document that has bearing on Melville and his family. It merits the adjective "exhaustive," but merits reference if you have questions about a specific episode or event in Melville's life.

Laurie Robertson-Lorant, *Herman Melville: A Biography* (Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1998).

Like Parker's biography, Robertson-Lorant's is a scholar's biography, but somewhat more accessible. She also takes on questions of Melville's misogyny and possible overbearing nature as a husband and father in ways worth thinking about.

Other useful books of reference:

*The Melville Log*, Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951).

*Correspondence*, V. 14 of *The Writings of Herman Melville* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1993)

*Herman Melville: An Introduction*, Wyn Kelley, (Wiley-Blackwell, 2008)

*Why Read Moby-Dick*, Nathaniel Philbrick, (Viking, 2011)