



HERMAN MELVILLE: BEYOND MOBY-DICK

The Rosenbach
Feb 24, March 24, Apr 28, May 19
12:00 – 2:00 p.m.

Professor Travis Foster
travis.foster@villanova.edu
330-317-9982 (cell)

Course Description

Before sliding into obscurity, Herman Melville was one of the most popular and infamous American writers of the nineteenth century. With the 1846 publication of *Typee*, a semi-autobiographical novel based on his own experiences as a whaleboat deserter captured by indigenous people of the Marquesas Islands, Melville became known as the “man who lived among the cannibals.” The reputation earned him wide readership, and the novel furthered the idea of him as an adventure writer whose tales would titillate readers with far-flung and frequently erotic accounts while scandalizing them with polemics against Christian missionaries, colonialism, and the notion of the West as somehow a beacon of “civilization.” As Melville’s career progressed, his focus shifted toward less lucrative themes, including the shortcomings of white liberalism, the drudgery of office work, the fragility of masculinity, and the sterility of modern life. Only decades later, at the beginning of the twentieth century, did Melville’s later work begin to acquire readers and reputation, leading him to become one of the most canonical and bespoken of nineteenth-century American writers.

This course won’t be anything close to a comprehensive survey of Melville’s writings. Yet by setting aside his behemoth, *Moby-Dick*, we will acquire depth into key texts that help us gain perspective on his career and, even more importantly, insight into his arguments about politics, power, self-deception, and modernity. We’ll begin, of course, with *Typee*, ascertaining just what all that 1840s fuss was all about. From there, we’ll read some of the short fiction written in the years following the 1851 publication of *Moby-Dick*: including “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” a short story that became something of an Occupy Wall Street mascot in 2011, and *Benito Cereno*, a novella that provides one of the period’s most harrowing accounts of the slave trade. During our third week, we’ll read the 1866 *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, Melville’s brilliant and frustrating collection of Civil War poetry, a volume that looks forward to the compromises of the postwar period as much as it reflects on the previous four years of violence. And, finally, for our last session, we’ll read the novella Melville left unfinished at

the time of his death, *Billy Budd, Sailor*, and we'll think about Melville's enduring relevance by examining two of that text's twentieth-century adaptations: Benjamin Britten's and E. M. Forster's 1951 opera, *Billy Budd*, and Claire Denis's 1999 film, *Beau Travail*.

Course Texts

Herman Melville, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (Penguin Classics)
-----, *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories* (Penguin Classics)
-----, *Battle Pieces and Other Aspects of the War* (De Capo Press)
-----, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (Penguin Classics)

Note: Many readers also find it easier to follow Melville's lengthy sentences when listening to his works rather than reading them. Most of our readings are available in quality audio editions through the Hoopla app, which links to your Free Library account.

Course Schedule

(Items to be emailed in pdf form indicated by *.)

February 24

Melville, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846)

*Andrew Delbanco, "Going Native," chapter 2 of *Melville: His World and Work* (2005)

March 24

Melville, "Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" (1853)

-----, *Benito Cereno* (1855)

-----, "The Lightning-Rod Man" (1856)

*Jonathan D. Breenberg, "Occupy Wall Street's Debt to Melville," *The Atlantic* (April 30, 2012)

*Greg Grandin, Introduction to *The Empire of Necessity: Slavery, Freedom, and Depiction in the New World* (2014)

April 28

Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857)

-----, *Battle Pieces and Other Aspects of the War* (1866) (be sure not to skip the "Supplement")

*Cody Marrs, "A Wayward Art: *Battle-Pieces* and Melville's Poetic Turn," *American Literature* (2010) (optional)

May 19

Melville, "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" (1855)

-----, *Billy Budd, Sailor* (written ~1888; first published 1924)

Benjamin Britten, *Billy Budd* (1951) (We'll be viewing scenes during our class. If you want to see the entire performance, there's a DVD of the 2011 Glyndebourne performance available through Opus Arte.)

Claire Denis (director), *Beau Travail* (2012)