Voyage of
The Pequod
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CHAPTER 1

The Voyage of
The Pequod

Introduction

Moby-Dick, also known as The Whale, is a novel first published in 1851 by American author Herman Melville. Moby-Dick is widely considered to be a Great American Novel and a treasure of world literature. The story tells the adventures of the wandering sailor Ishmael, and his voyage on the whaleship Pequod, commanded by Captain Ahab. Ishmael soon learns that Ahab seeks one specific whale: Moby Dick, a ferocious, enigmatic white sperm whale. In a previous encounter, the whale destroyed Ahab's boat and bit off his leg. Ahab intends to take revenge.

In Moby-Dick, Melville employs stylized language, symbolism, and metaphor to explore numerous complex themes. Through the main character's journey, the concepts of class and social status, good and evil, and the existence of gods are all examined as Ishmael speculates upon his personal beliefs and his place in the universe. The narrator's reflections, along with his descriptions of a sailor's life aboard a whaling ship, are woven into the narrative along with Shakespearean literary devices such as stage directions, extended soliloquies, and asides. The book portrays insecurity that is still seen today when it comes to non-human beings along with the belief that these beings understand and act like humans. The story is based on the actual events around the whaleship Essex, which was attacked by a sperm whale while at sea and sank.

Moby-Dick has been classified as American Romanticism. It was first published by Richard Bentley in London on October 18, 1851, in an expurgated three-volume edition titled The Whale, and weeks later as a single volume, by New York City publisher Harper and Brothers as Moby-Dick; or, The Whale on November 14, 1851. Although the book initially received mixed reviews, Moby-Dick is now considered part of the Western canon.

Source: Wikipedia entry of Moby Dick; Redirected from The Voyage of The Pequod
Background

Melville published Moby-Dick in 1851 during a productive time in American literature, which also produced novels such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter and Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin. Two actual events inspired Melville’s tale. One was the sinking of the Nantucket ship Essex in 1820, after it was rammed by a large sperm whale 2,000 miles (3,200 km) from the western coast of South America. First mate Owen Chase, one of eight survivors, recorded the events in his 1821 Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex. Already out-of-print, the book was rare even in 1851. Knowing that Melville was looking for it, his father-in-law, Lemuel Shaw, managed to find a copy and buy it for him. When Melville received it, he fell to it almost immediately, heavily annotating it.

THE WHITE WHALE, DEFINED

The other event was the alleged killing in the late 1830s of the albino sperm whale Mocha Dick, in the waters off the Chilean island of Mocha. Mocha Dick had dozens of harpoons from attacks by other whalers, and appeared to attack ships with premeditated ferocity. One of his battles with a whaler served as subject for an article by explorer Jeremiah N. Reynolds in the May 1839 issue of The Knickerbocker, New York Monthly Magazine. Melville was familiar with the article, which described “an old bull whale, of prodigious size and strength... [that] was white as wool” Significantly, Reynolds writes a first-person narration that serves as a frame for the story of a whaling captain he meets. The captain resembles Ahab and suggests a possible symbolism for whales in that, when his crew first encounters Mocha Dick and cowards from him, the captain rallies them thus:

"Mocha Dick or the d----l [devil],’ said I, ‘this boat never sheers off from any thing that wears the shape of a whale.’"

Mocha Dick had over 100 encounters with whalers between the 1810s and the 1830s. He was described as being gigantic and covered in barnacles. Although he was the most famous, Mocha Dick was not the only white whale in the sea, nor the only whale to attack hunters, examples being the Union in 1807 and the
Kathleen in 1902. Also inspirational for the novel were Melville's experiences as a sailor, in particular during 1841–1842 on the whaleship Acushnet. He had already drawn on his different sailing experiences in previous novels such as Mardi but he had never focused specifically on whaling. Melville had read Chase's account of the Essex's sinking before sailing on the Acushnet in 1841 and was excited about the possibility of sighting Captain Chase himself who had returned to sea. During a mid-ocean “gam” (rendezvous) he met Chase's son William, who loaned him his father's book. There had also been a successful earlier novel about Nantucket whalers, which influenced elements of Melville's work, Miriam Coffin or The Whale-Fisher (1835) by Joseph C. Hart.

THE STORY AS IT RELATES TO HISTORY
Moby-Dick contains large sections—most of them narrated by Ishmael—that seemingly have nothing to do with the plot but describe aspects of the whaling business. Melville believed that no book up to that time had portrayed the whaling industry in as fascinating or immediate a way as he had experienced it. Early Romantics also proposed that fiction was the exemplary way to describe and record history, so Melville wanted to craft something educational and definitive. Despite his own interest in the subject, Melville struggled with composition, writing to Richard Henry Dana, Jr. on May 1, 1850:

“I am half way in the work ... It will be a strange sort of book, tho', I fear; blubber is blubber you know; tho' you might get oil out of it, the poetry runs as hard as sap from a frozen maple tree; — and 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.”

There are scholarly theories that purport a literary legend of two Moby-Dick tales, one being a whaling tale as was Melville's experience and affinity, and another deeper tale, inspired by his literary friendship with and respect for Nathaniel Hawthorne. These merged into the latter, the morality tale. Hawthorne and his family had moved to a small red farmhouse near Lenox, Massachusetts, at the end of March 1850. He became friends
with Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. and Herman Melville beginning on August 5, 1850, when the authors met at a picnic hosted by a mutual friend. Melville had just read Hawthorne’s short story collection Mosses from an Old Manse, and his unsigned review of the collection, titled “Hawthorne and His Mosses”, was printed in the Literary World on August 17 and August 24. Melville, who was composing Moby-Dick at the time, wrote that these stories revealed a dark side to Hawthorne, “shrouded in blackness, ten times black”. Melville dedicated Moby-Dick (1851) to Hawthorne: “In token of my admiration for his genius, this book is inscribed to Nathaniel Hawthorne.”

Themes

Moby-Dick is a symbolic work, but also includes chapters on natural history. Major themes include obsession, religion, idealism, courage versus pragmatism, revenge, racism, sanity, hierarchical relationships, and politics. All of the members of the crew have biblical-sounding, improbable, or descriptive names, and the narrator deliberately avoids specifying the exact time of the events (such as the giant whale disappearing into the dark abyss of the ocean) and some other similar details. These together suggest that the narrator — and not just Melville — is deliberately casting his tale in an epic and allegorical mode. The white whale has also been seen as a symbol for many things, including nature and those elements of life that are out of human control.

Melville mentions the Matsya Avatar of Vishnu, the first among ten incarnations when Vishnu appears as a giant fish on Earth and saves creation from the flood of destruction. Melville mentions this while discussing the spiritual and mystical aspects of the sailing profession and he calls Lord Vishnu as the first among whales and the God of whalers.

The Pequod’s quest to hunt down Moby Dick itself is also widely viewed as allegorical. To Ahab, killing the whale becomes the ultimate goal in his life, and this observation can also be expanded allegorically so that the whale represents everyone’s
goals. Furthermore, his vengeance against the whale is analogous to man’s struggle against fate. The only escape from Ahab’s vision is seen through the Pequod’s occasional encounters, called gams, with other ships. Readers could consider what exactly Ahab will do if he, in fact, succeeds in his quest: having accomplished his ultimate goal, what else is there left for him to do? Similarly, Melville may be implying that people in general need something to reach for in life, or that such a goal can destroy one if allowed to overtake all other concerns. Some such things are hinted at early on in the book, when the main character, Ishmael, is sharing a cold bed with his newfound friend, Queequeg:

“...truly to enjoy bodily warmth, some small part of you must be cold, for there is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast. Nothing exists in itself. If you flatter yourself that you are all over comfortable, and have been so a long time, then you cannot be said to be comfortable any more.”

— Moby-Dick, Ch. 11

Ahab’s pipe is widely looked upon as the riddance of happiness in Ahab’s life. By throwing the pipe overboard, Ahab signifies that he no longer can enjoy simple pleasures in life; instead, he dedicates his entire life to the pursuit of his obsession, the killing of the white whale, Moby Dick. A number of biblical themes can also be found in the novel. The book contains multiple implicit and explicit allusions to the story of Jonah, in addition to the use of certain biblical names. Ishmael’s musings also allude to themes common among the American Transcendentalists and parallel certain themes in European Romanticism and the philosophy of Hegel. In the poetry of Whitman and the prose writings of Emerson and Thoreau, a ship at sea is sometimes a metaphor for the soul.

A Brief description of Moby Dick’s Characters

**ISHMAEL**

“Call me Ishmael,” Moby-Dick begins, in one of the most recognizable opening lines in English-language literature. The narrator, an observant young man setting out from Manhattan, has experience in the merchant marine but has recently decided
his next voyage will be on a whaling ship. On a cold, gloomy night in December, he arrives at the Spouter-Inn in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and agrees to share a bed with a then-absent stranger.

**QUEEQUEG**

When his bunk mate, a heavily tattooed Polynesian harpooner named Queequeg, returns very late and discovers Ishmael beneath his covers, both men are alarmed, but the two quickly become close friends and decide to sail together from Nantucket, Massachusetts on a whaling voyage.

**AHAB**

In Nantucket, the pair signs on with the Pequod, a whaling ship that is soon to leave port. The ship’s captain, Ahab, is nowhere to be seen; nevertheless, they are told of him — a “grand, ungodly, godlike man,” who has “been in colleges as well as ‘mong the cannibals,” according to one of the owners.

**ELIJAH**

The two friends encounter a mysterious man named Elijah on the dock after they sign their papers and he hints at troubles to come with Ahab. The mystery grows on Christmas morning when Ishmael spots dark figures in the mist, apparently boarding the Pequod shortly before it sets sail that day. The ship’s officers direct the early voyage while Ahab stays in his cabin. The chief mate is Starbuck, a serious, sincere Quaker and fine leader; second mate is Stubb, happy-go-lucky and cheerful and always smoking his pipe; the third mate is Flask, short and stout but thoroughly reliable. Each mate is responsible for a whaling boat, and each whaling boat of the Pequod has its own pagan harpooneer assigned to it. Some time after sailing, Ahab finally appears on the quarter-deck one morning, an imposing, frightening figure whose haunted visage sends shivers over the narrator.

“He looked like a man cut away from the stake, when the fire has overruningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them, or taking away one particle from their compacted aged robustness... Threading its way out from among his grey hairs, and continuing right down one side of his tawny scorched face and neck, till it disappeared in his clothing, you saw a slender rod-like mark, lividly whit-
ish. It resembled that perpendicular seam sometimes made in the straight, lofty trunk of a great tree, when the upper lightning tearingly darts down it, and without wrenching a single twig, peels and grooves out the bark from top to bottom ere running off into the soil, leaving the tree still greenly alive, but branded.”

One of his legs is missing from the knee down and has been replaced by a prosthesis fashioned from a sperm whale’s jawbone. Soon gathering the crewmen together, with a rousing speech Ahab secures their support for his single, secret purpose for this voyage: hunting down and killing Moby Dick, an old, very large sperm whale, with a snow-white hump and mottled skin, that crippled Ahab on his last whaling voyage. Only Starbuck shows any sign of resistance to the charismatic but monomaniacal captain. The first mate argues repeatedly that the ship’s purpose should be to hunt whales for their oil, with luck returning home profitably, safely, and quickly, but not to seek out and kill Moby Dick in particular — and especially not for revenge. Eventually even Starbuck acquiesces to Ahab’s will, though harboring misgivings.

The mystery of the dark figures seen before the Pequod set sail is explained during the voyage’s first lowering for whales. Ahab has secretly brought along his own boat crew, including a mysterious harpooneer named Fedallah (also referred to as ‘the Parsee’), an inscrutable figure with a sinister influence over Ahab. Later, while watching one night over a captured whale carcass, Fedallah gives dark prophecies to Ahab regarding their twin deaths.

The novel describes numerous “gams,” social meetings of two ships on the open sea. Crews normally visit each other during a gam, captains on one vessel and chief mates on the other. Mail may be exchanged and the men talk of whale sightings or other news. For Ahab, however, there is but one relevant question to ask of another ship: “Hast seen the White Whale?” After meeting several other whaling ships, which have their own peculiar stories, the Pequod enters the Pacific Ocean. Queequeg becomes deathly ill and requests that a coffin be built for him by the ship’s carpenter. Just as everyone has given up hope, Queequeg changes his mind, deciding to live after all, and recovers quickly.
His coffin becomes his sea chest, and is later caulked and pitched to replace the Pequod’s life buoy.

Soon word is heard from other whalers of Moby Dick. The jolly Captain Boomer of the Samuel Enderby has lost an arm to the whale, and is stunned at Ahab’s burning need for revenge. Next they meet the Rachel, which has seen Moby Dick very recently. As a result of the encounter, one of its boats is missing; the captain’s youngest son had been aboard. The Rachel’s captain begs Ahab to aid in the search for the missing boat, but Ahab is resolute; the Pequod is very near the White Whale now and will not stop to help. Finally the Delight is met, even as its captain buries a sailor who had been killed by Moby Dick. Starbuck begs Ahab one final time to reconsider his thirst for vengeance, but to no avail.

The next day, the Pequod meets Moby Dick. For two days, the Pequod’s crew pursues the whale, which wreaks widespread destruction, including the disappearance of Fedallah. On the third day, Moby Dick rises up to reveal Fedallah tied to him by harpoon ropes, clearly dead. Even after the initial battle on the third day, as Moby Dick swims away from the Pequod, Starbuck exhorts Ahab one last time to desist, observing that

“Moby-Dick seeks thee not. It is thou, thou, that madly seekest him!”

Ahab ignores this voice of reason and continues with his ill-fated chase. As the three boats sail out to hunt him, Moby Dick damages two of them, forcing them to go back to the ship and leaving only Ahab’s vessel intact. Ahab harpoons the whale, but the harpoon-line breaks. Moby Dick then rams the Pequod itself, which begins to sink. As Ahab harpoons the whale again, the unfolding harpoon-line catches him around his neck and he is dragged into the depths of the sea by the diving Moby Dick. The boat is caught up in the whirlpool of the sinking ship, which takes almost all the crew to their deaths. Only Ishmael survives, clinging to Queequeg’s coffin-turned-life buoy for an entire day and night before the Rachel rescues him.
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