

## Suggested Internet Resources

Periodically, Internet Resources are updated on our Web site at [www.LibraryVideo.com](http://www.LibraryVideo.com)

- [www.melville.org/mobyname.htm](http://www.melville.org/mobyname.htm)  
This site provides information regarding the origin of the name "Moby Dick."
- [people.brandeis.edu/~teuber/melvillebio.html](http://people.brandeis.edu/~teuber/melvillebio.html)  
This site, developed by a professor at Brandeis University, has an extensive and interesting biography of Herman Melville.
- [www.whalingmuseum.org/index.html](http://www.whalingmuseum.org/index.html)  
The web site of the New Bedford Whaling Museum has a variety of excellent information and visuals regarding the history of whaling in the United States.

## Suggested Print Resources

- Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick*. NAL, New York, NY; 2001.
- Norling, Lisa. *Captain Abab Had a Wife: New England Women and the Whalefisherman*. The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC; 2000.

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### TEACHER'S GUIDE

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### WORLD LITERARY CLASSICS

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- BEOWULF
  - DON QUIXOTE
  - MOBY DICK
  - SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT
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## MOBY DICK

### Grades 9 & up

The study of literature is the study of human history, psychology, sociology and politics. When we study literature, we, in essence, study ourselves and the societies we have created. The stories we tell, and the characters we use to tell them, reveal to us our true nature: what we think is important, what makes us laugh, what we love and what we are willing to die for. The importance of literary classics to any particular culture is evidenced not only by their longevity, which attests to their relevance across centuries, but also by how often they are adapted, quoted, studied and discussed. The study of literature allows us to learn about the way things were, analyze how things are, and imagine how things might be.



## Moby Dick and Herman Melville

Herman Melville was born in New York City in 1819. Although Melville's family was initially quite well-off, his father, an importer of dry goods from France, became bankrupt, which contributed to his suffering a mental breakdown. He died when Melville was only twelve years old. The elder Melville's untimely death forced young Herman into the work force at age thirteen. He worked variously as a teacher, clerk and farmhand to help support his mother and seven siblings. At the age of twenty, he became a cabin boy and later joined the U.S. Navy. His voyages and experiences on the high seas became the well from which he drew material for many of his novels. For instance, Melville lived among the cannibals on the Marquesas Islands, and this became the basis of *Typee* (1846), one of Melville's few financially successful novels.

Melville married in 1847, and around 1850 bought Arrowhead, a farm in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. He lived near Nathaniel Hawthorne, who became a life-long friend and a source of great inspiration, for in Hawthorne, Melville found a kindred spirit.

During the writing of *Moby Dick*, Melville described the work in progress as "a strange sort of book..." In a burst of creative energy, Melville wrote feverishly from morning till night, not eating a thing, and at one point shouting, "Give me Vesuvius' crater as an ink stand!"

*Moby Dick*, Melville's masterpiece, was published in 1851, but it was not nearly as successful as either *Typee* or *Omoo*. Most critics, along with the public, didn't understand the book, and during Melville's lifetime it sold only 3,000 copies. It was not until nearly thirty years after Melville's death of heart failure in 1891 that his work was "rediscovered" and finally took its place alongside America's great masterpieces. *Moby Dick* is a work of genius and is one of the few American novels that are universally considered to be world classics.

## Pre-viewing Discussion

- Discuss the concept of allegorical literature. Provide examples of allegory from other books, poems, or films.
- Have a discussion with your students about the many layers of meaning in *Moby Dick*, and how the book can be read from a variety of perspectives: psychological, religious, allegorical or just as a good adventure story.

## Focus Questions

1. What is the name of the ship that Ishmael sets sail aboard?
2. Describe Captain Ahab's crew.
3. How many days pass before Ahab addresses the crew?
4. What reason does Ahab give for wanting to pursue Moby Dick?
5. What is the reward for slaying the white whale?
6. Why does Starbuck think it is wrong to pursue Moby Dick?
7. Who does Ahab refuse to assist in order to pursue Moby Dick?
8. What events are prophesied aboard the Pequod?
9. What are the circumstances of Captain Ahab's death?
10. What is the name of the narrator of the story?

## Follow-up Discussion

- Have a discussion with your students about the nature of obsession. Are there any circumstances under which obsession is positive?
- Discuss the Pequod's crew from a psychological perspective. What sort of people would go along with Ahab's plan to slay the white whale? What, other than money, might be the motivation for following Ahab?

## Follow-up Activities

- The novel *Moby Dick* is rife with symbolism, and with things that are more than what they appear to be. In small groups, have students select five elements from the book and analyze their symbolic meanings. Then have students create some type of visual presentation to explain and illustrate their analyses.
- Melville's white whale has come to symbolize an elusive and unconquerable obstacle. Provide each group with a list of five people — some fictional, some real — and have them identify each individual's white whale.
- In small groups, have your students conduct research into the whaling industry of 19th-century America. Students should research types of ships, ports of call, whaling weaponry and tools, and recruitment of crews.
- Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne were good friends and maintained an extensive correspondence. Have students read some of their original letters and comment on the nature of the friendship between these two giants of American literature.

Useful resource: [www.melville.org/melville.htm](http://www.melville.org/melville.htm)

- Have students complete a rather extensive Moby Dick crossword puzzle. Alternatively, students could create one of their own. Useful resource: [www.colorado.edu/English/klages/4md.html](http://www.colorado.edu/English/klages/4md.html) (Click on the Moby Dick crossword puzzle.)
- When *Moby Dick* was published it was not as successful as some of Melville's previous novels. Have students research the critical reaction to the book when it was published and compare and contrast those original reviews to how the book is regarded today. Students will have to find book reviews from the time the book was published. They should also make suggestions as to why the public's opinion of *Moby Dick* changed. Useful resource: [www.press.jhu.edu/press/books/titles/parker/mobyreviews.htm](http://www.press.jhu.edu/press/books/titles/parker/mobyreviews.htm)
- Have students write journal entries as crewmen aboard the Pequod the day they discovered Captain Ahab's true intention.
- Have students pretend that they are 19th-century journalists working for a fictitious New England newspaper. Have them write news articles about the Pequod. Students should interview Ishmael for their investigative pieces.