



The Philosophy of

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*

Biography

Herman Melville, the famous American short story writer, novelist, and poet, was born in 1819 in New York City and died in 1891. He produced numerous literary works, including his romantic accounts of life in Polynesia titled *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), *The Piazza Tales* (1857) and *The Confidence Man* (1857), and his most famous work, *Moby-Dick*, in 1851. His “metaphysical” work, *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*, was published in 1876. His novella, *Billy Budd*, another masterpiece, a “morality tale” and psychological study about an angelic young sailor, Billy, whose innocence, charm and popularity arouses jealousy and leads to his downfall and hanging, was unfinished at his death but was later completed by his widow and others. When Melville’s father, a merchant, went bankrupt and died suddenly, Herman, the third of seven children, about 15 years old at the time, had to drop out of school to help support the family. He worked as a teacher, helper on his uncle’s farm, and clerk at a local bank. During this time, however, he read extensively in mythology, anthropology and history, but was especially fascinated by Shakespeare’s magnificent poetry. He also learned at this time of the thrilling true story of the whaling ship *Essex* attacked and sunk by a giant whale in the South Seas in 1820.

In 1839, Melville took his first sea voyage as a cabin boy on a merchant ship. A year later, he joined the crew of the whaling vessel *Acushnet* in January of 1841. After a year and a half on the *Acushnet*, he and a fellow seaman were captured by cannibals in the Marquesas Islands, who, Melville said, treated him well, and lived with them for about a time until he was rescued by an Australian whaling ship, the *Lucy Ann*. He travelled on the *Lucy Ann* to Tahiti where he and another crew member committed mutiny. He was briefly jailed, but escaped and travelled to the nearby island *Eimeo* where he worked on a potato farm. Uninspired by potato farming, he joined the whaling ship *Charles and Henry* as a harpooner. When the *Charles and Henry* anchored in *Maui Island* 5 months later, he worked as a clerk and a bookkeeper in a general store in Honolulu. In August of 1843 he enlisted in the United States navy and worked as a seaman on the navy ship *United States* as it sailed around the Pacific. In October of 1844, Herman returned to his mother’s house to write about his adventures. His first manuscript, *Typee*, in which Tommo, the narrator, is captured by cannibals in the South Pacific Marquesas Islands, was rejected by publishers because they could not believe the story. It was later published to favourable reviews in London where it was seen to explore the relationship by a New Englander and an exotic foreign culture. The modest financial success of his early works enabled him to marry Elizabeth “Lizzie” Shaw, the daughter of a prominent Boston family, in 1847. His best-known work, *Moby-Dick*, inspired by the true

story of the Essex, was not well-received in the United States, but was slightly better received in England. The great American writer, Nathaniel Hawthorne, impressed by an early manuscript of Moby-Dick, became a lifelong friend and gave Melville much encouragement. There have been somewhat speculative claims of a homoerotic relationship between Melville and Hawthorne, and there are definite homoerotic passages in Moby-Dick, usually in the form of humour. After the disappointment of Moby-Dick's reception, and the tragic early deaths of several of his children, and difficulties in his marriage due to financial problems and his drinking, Melville battled depression, obscurity, and financial ruin. A trip to Europe to visit Hawthorne did little to lighten his depression. Melville toured from 1857 to 1860 giving lectures on a wide range of topics associated with his adventures before moving back to New York where, believing himself a failure, he worked as a customs inspector on the New York docks until his death. However, many scholars now see Moby-Dick as the quintessential American novel and one of the great literary works of all time. Moby-Dick, written by a man who never finished high school, is now on virtually every high school reading list in the United States and is celebrated around the world. Many of Melville's other works are also now recognized as masterpieces.

Moby-Dick

Although, on the surface, the novel is about the battle between a whaling ship, the Pequod, and a giant malevolent white whale, the language in Moby-Dick, is deeply symbolical. Numerous philosophers are mentioned, including Pythagoras, Plato, Pyrrho, Cato, Aristotle, Seneca and the Stoics, Descartes, Locke, Spinoza, Kant and Burke. The novel explores metaphysics, cosmology, good and evil, race, class, social status, and the human psyche. It can do all these things simultaneously because Moby-Dick advances the ancient microcosmic doctrine, inherited from Pythagoras and Plato, the view that all living organisms, including human beings and whales, are miniature copies of the entire cosmos. Thus, to explore the nature of the universe is at the same time to explore the nature of the human soul and human society for these are all images of each other. Since the whale is a living organism, it too is a microcosm of the whole universe, and, because identity is transitive, the nature of the whale is identical with human nature. Thus, the confrontation between the crew of the whaling ship and the giant malevolent whale symbolically represents the confrontation between human beings with their own mysterious darker malevolent selves. There is a curious complete absence of females in *Moby-Dick*. However, it is possible that the female principle is represented, as in the ancient Babylonian myths, by the sea itself (*Tiamat*). The sea, with its dark mysterious depths, also symbolizes the human psyche.

Since the crew of the Pequod is a motley collection of characters, including white New England Christians, Africans and Asians, representing a wide array of exotic religious beliefs, the Pequod is a "little world," a microcosm of the entire human family. Since according to the microcosmic doctrine, all living organisms resemble the entire cosmos, they all also resemble each other. Moby-Dick explores this hidden microcosmic unity, transcending all the differences of culture, race, social status, and religion, between all these vastly different men aboard the Pequod and between all of them and the whole cosmos. The two most important characters in Moby-Dick are Ishmael, the spokesperson for the deepest values expressed in the novel, who at one-point hints that he has a New England Presbyterian background, and Queequeg, the savage tattooed harpoon-carrying Polynesian cannibal with whom Ishmael, initially reluctantly, shares a tiny bed. The name

“Ishmael,” in Jewish, Christian and Muslim literature connotes an outcast and a wanderer. Ishmael was the first son of Abraham, not conceived by his barren wife Sarah, but by her Egyptian handmaiden, Hagar. Thus, Ishmael “shall be a wild donkey of a man” (Genesis 16:2). The novel explores the nature of the cosmos as it explores the relationship between these two very different “outsiders,” the Christian New Englander who calls himself “Ishmael” and the savage cannibal harpooner Queequeg, as they wander together, learning from each other, over the hazardous seas of life, searching to plumb the natures of the universe until the great white whale rises up out of the cosmic depths at the end of the novel and shatters their little human worlds.

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2020

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Notes:

There is a complete online edition of *Moby-Dick* at Project Gutenberg: URL: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2701/2701-h/2701-h.htm>

There is a complete online edition of *Billy Budd* at Bibliomania. URL: <http://www.bibliomania.com/0/0/36/1006/frameset.html>

There are several of Melville's works, including several commentaries on his works, at *Project Gutenberg*. URL: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/search/?query=Herman+Melville>

There is a complete user-friendly online version of *Clarel* at URL: <https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Clarel>

Author citation information:

<Richard, McDonough, "The Philosophy of Moby Dick," *ODIP: The Online Dictionary of Intercultural Philosophy* (2012), Thorsten Botz-Bornstein (ed.), URL = <www.Odiphilosophy.com/huxley>.