

“Chasing the White Whale - Adventure and Obsession” Class Syllabus

Herman Melville burst on the American literary scene when he published his first novel, “Typee” in 1846 at the age of 26. Set in the Marquesas Islands and based on his own life experiences, it provided an exotic view of Polynesian life and society. Its presentation of sexuality and its unflattering view of missionaries were provocative for his day. His second novel, “Omoo,” was published the following year and was also a popular success.

Four years later, in 1851, Melville published “Moby Dick or The Whale.” Unlike his earlier novels, “Moby Dick” received mixed reviews and did not sell well. A critic in the Boston Post titled his review as, “Not Worth the Money Asked For It.” In the New York Independent, a critic wrote, “In this volume...there are some of the queerest specimens of ground and lofty tumblings in the literary line.” Melville considered the novel a failure up until his death in 1891; it was some 30 years later, in the 1920’s, that “Moby Dick” began to be seen as a great American novel.

“Moby Dick” is a challenging novel to read. Many a high school student has struggled with Melville’s style and the novel’s length. But a reading today provides a rich voyage into a unique world of adventure that long ago disappeared from American society and a cast of characters that shows us the true depth of their souls.

Come join us on the Pequod!

(All page numbers are from the Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition, which is the preferred version for class and which is available through Amazon).

September 6: Read Chapter 1. “Loomings” through Chapter 18. “His Mark” (pages 3-99)

Special focus on: Chapter 1. “Loomings”

Chapter 3. “The Spouter Inn”

Chapter 4. “The Counterpane”

Chapter 10. “A Bosom Friend”

Chapter 17. “The Ramadan”

September 13: Read Chapter 19. “The Prophet” through Chapter 42. “The Whiteness of the Whale” (pages 100- 212)

Special focus on: Chapter 19. “The Prophet”

Chapter 28. “Ahab”

Chapter 29. “Enter Ahab; To Him Stubb

Chapter 36. “The Quarter-deck”

Chapter 41. “Moby Dick”

Chapter 42. “The Whiteness of the Whale”

September 20: Read Chapters 43. “Hark” through Chapter 61 “Stubb Kills A Whale” (pages 213-312)

Special focus on: Chapter 44. “The Chart”

Chapter 54. “The Town-Ho’s Story”

Chapter 61. “Stubb Kills A Whale”

September 27: Read Chapters 62. “The Dart” through Chapter 86. “The Tail” (pages 313-414)

Special focus on: Chapter 64. Stubb's Supper"
Chapter 71. "The Jeroboam's Story"
Chapter 73. Stubb and Flask Kill a
Right Whale; and then Have
a Talk Over Him"
Chapter 81. "The Pequod Meets the
Virgin"

October 4: Read Chapters 87. "The Grand Armada" through
Chapter 110. "Queequeg in his Coffin" (pages 415-524)
Special focus on: Chapter 87. "The Grand Armada"
Chapter 93. "The Castaway"
Chapter 99. "The Doubloon"
Chapter 109. "Ahab and Starbuck in the
Cabin"
Chapter 110. "Queequeg in his Coffin"

October 11: Read Chapters 111. "The Pacific" through "The
Epilogue" (pages 525-625)
Chapter 117. "The Whale Watch"
Chapter 119. "The Candles"
Chapter 123. "The Musket"
Chapter 128. "The Pequod Meets the
n Rachel"
Chapter 133. "The Chase – First Day"
Chapter 134. "The Chase – Second
Day"
Chapter 135. "The Chase – Third Day"
Epilogue

A few Additional Resources:

An annotated “Moby Dick” (with some annoying ads)

<http://www.powermobydick.com/>

“Why Read Moby Dick?” Nathaniel Philbrick.

A collection of short essays (available through Amazon}

“The Hunt for Whales” short film from Nantucket Whaling Museum, available on YouTube. (Search for Nantucket Whaling Museum)