

Herman Melville (1819-1891)
Petri Liukkonen

American author, best-known for his novels of the sea and his masterpiece *MOBY-DICK* (1851), a whaling adventure dedicated to Nathaniel Hawthorne. "I have written a wicked book and feel as spotless as the lamb," Melville wrote to Hawthorne. The work was only recognized as a masterpiece 30 years after Melville's death. *TYPEE* (1846), a fictionalized travel narrative, was the author's most popular book during his lifetime.

"All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the less of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in *Moby Dick*. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it." (from *Moby-Dick*)

Herman Melville was born in New York City into an established merchant family. One of his grandfather's had taken part in the Boston Tea Party dressed in Indian garb. Herman was the third child of eight. His father, Allan Melvill, an importer of French dry goods, went bankrupt and died when Melville was 12. Maria Gansevoort Melvill was left alone to raise the children; at that time the family lived in Albany. Occasionally she received help from her wealthy relatives. Through his mother's influence, biblical stories became a part of Melville's imagination from his early childhood.

A bout of scarlet fever in 1826 left Melville with permanently weakened eyesight. He attended Albany (N.Y.) Classical School in 1835. After leaving the school he was largely autodidact. Despite his weak eyes, Melville devoured Shakespeare as well as historical, anthropological, and technical works. From the age of 12, he worked as a clerk, teacher, and farmhand.

In search of adventures, Melville shipped out in 1839 as a cabin boy on the whaler *Acushnet*. He joined later the US Navy, and started his years long voyages on ships, sailing both the Atlantic and the South Seas. During these years he was a clerk and bookkeeper in general store in Honolulu and lived briefly among the Typee cannibals in the Marquesas Islands. Another ship rescued him and took him to Tahiti. In his mid-20's Melville returned to his mother's house to write about his adventures.

Typee, an account of Melville's stay with the cannibals, was first published in Britain, like most of his works. The narrator, a crew member of a whale ship, calls himself "Tom". He spends four months among a group of islanders on Nukuheva in the Pacific Ocean and learns to make a distinction between a savage and cannibal. Tattooing he

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rejects. *Typee* sold roughly 6,000 copies in its first two years. Its sequel, *OMOO* (1847), was based on Melville's experiences in Polynesian Islands, and gained a huge success as the first one. Throughout his career Melville enjoyed a rather higher estimation in Britain than in America. His older brother Gansevoort held a government position in London, and helped to launch Melville's career. With his third book, *MARDI AND A VOYAGE THITHER* (1849), Melville decided to take distance to the expectations of his readers. In this he also succeeded, and lost his audience.

In 1847 Melville married Elisabeth Shaw, daughter of the chief justice of Massachusetts. After three years in New York, he bought a farm, "Arrowhead", near Nathaniel Hawthorne's home at Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and became friends with him for some time. Melville had almost completed *Moby-Dick* when Hawthorne encouraged him to change it from a story full of details about whaling, into an allegorical novel.

"In general, it is the non-psychological novel that offers the richest opportunities for psychological elucidation. Here the author, having no intentions of this sort, does not show his characters in a psychological light and thus leaves room for analysis and interpretation, or even invites it by his unprejudiced mode of presentation... I would also include Melville's *Moby Dick*, which I consider the be the greatest American novel, in this broad class of writings." (Carl Jung in *The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature*, 1967)

Inspired by the achievement of Hawthorne, Melville wrote his masterpiece, *Moby-Dick*. He worked at his desk all day not eating anything till 4 or 5 o'clock, and bursting with energy he shouted: "Give me Vesuvius' crater for an inkstand!" When the novel was published, it did not bring him the fame he had acquired in the 1840s. Readers of *Typee* and *Omoo* were not expecting this kind of story, and its brilliance was only noted by some critics. Through the story Melville meditated questions about faith and the workings of God's intelligence. He returned to these meditations in his last great work, *BILLY BUDD*, a story left unfinished at his death. Its manuscript was found in Melville's desk when he died.

"Call me Ishmael," says the narrator in the beginning of *Moby-Dick*; it is one of the most famous first lines in American literature. We don't know if it is his real name and exactly when the story is taking place. The biblical Ishmael was disinherited and dismissed from his home. The narrator signs aboard the whaler *Pequod* with his friend Queequeg, a harpooner from the South Sea Islands. Then the mood of the story changes. Suddenly the reader is confronted by a plurality of linguistic discourses, philosophical speculations, and Shakespearean rhetoric and dramatic staging. Mysterious Captain Ahab, a combination of Macbeth, Job, and Milton's Satan, appears after several days at sea. Melville named the character after the Israelite king who worshiped the pagan sun god Baal. Ahab reveals to the crew that the purpose of the voyage is to hunt and kill the snow-white sperm whale, known as Moby-Dick, that had cost Ahab his leg on a

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previous voyage. The captain has his own faith and sees the cosmos in contention between two rival deities. "Oh! thou clear spirit of clear fire, whom on these seas I as Persian once did worship, till in the sacramental act so burned by thee, that to this hour I bear the scar; I know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance." Ahab has nailed a goldpiece to the mast and offers it as a reward to the first man who sights the creature. Starbuck, the first mate, tries to dissuade Ahab from the quest. The novel culminates when Moby-Dick charges the boat which sinks. Ahab is drowned, tied by the harpoon line his archenemy. In his end Ahab takes his crew with him. The only survivor is the narrator, who is rescued by a passing ship.

One of Melville's sources was an article by Jeremiah N. Reynolds, entitled 'Mocha Dick: Or, the White Whale of the Pacific' (1839). It told about an albino sperm whale, which was said to have sunk ships, drowned men, and harpooned many times. Melville's masterwork was largely misunderstood and it sold only some 3,000 copies during his lifetime. Its original title was *The Whale*, when it was published in London by Richard Bentley in October 1851, but this English edition was bowdlerized. The American Harper edition, which appeared in November, was definitive.

Moby-Dick can be read as a thrilling sea story, an examination of the conflict between man and nature – the battle between Ahab and the whale is open to many interpretations. It is a pioneer novel but the prairie is now sea, or an allegory on the Gold Rush, but now the gold is a whale. Jorge Luis Borges has seen in the universe of *Moby-Dick* "a cosmos (a chaos) not only perceptibly malignant as the Gnostics had intuited, but also irrational, like the cosmos in the hexameters of Lucretius." (from *The Total Library*, 1999) Clare Spark has connected in *Hunting Captain Ahab* (2001) different interpretations with changing political atmosphere – depending on the point of view, Ahab has been regarded as a Promethean hero or a forefather of the twentieth-century totalitarian dictators. The director John Huston questions in his film version (1956) which one, Ahab or the whale, is the real Monster. Ray Bradbury, with whom Huston wrote the screenplay, had to struggle with the Screen Writers' Guild over his credits. In Bradbury's version, the whale is destructed.

REDBURN (1849) and WHITE-JACKED (1850) Melville wrote to get money. The author compared his work to "sawing wood". PIERRE (1852), a Gothic romance and psychological study based on the author's childhood, was a financial and critical disaster. Melville's stories in Putnam's *Monthly Magazine* reflected the despair and the contempt for human hypocrisy and materialism. Among the stories were 'The Scrivener' (1853), 'The Encantadas' (1854) and 'Benito Cereno' (1855), in which a slave ship is secretly under the command of the captain's personal slave. 'Bartleby', later published as part of the collection entitled THE PIAZZA TALES (1856), was a story about a passive copyist, who confronts life with an Everlasting Nay – "I would prefer not to," is his quiet defense against the changing world. The narrator, a Wall Street lawyer, tries in

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vain to understand the unresponsive employee, who refuses to leave the office after being fired.

In 1855 Melville had a breakdown – he started to believe that he was not going to get fame with his writing. *THE CONFIDENCE MAN* (1857), Melville's last major effort, was a harsh satire of American life set on a Mississippi River steamboat. After 1857 he wrote only some poetry. His health was failing, he did not earn enough money to support his family, and he was a dependent of his wealthy father-in-law. To recover from a breakdown, he undertook a long journey to Europe and the Holy Land. The long poem *CLAREL* (1876), based on this trip, was about religious crisis and reflected Melville's Manichean view of God.

Clarel was ignored. Subsequent works were privately printed and distributed among a very small circle of acquaintances. After unsuccessful lecture tours in 1857-60, Melville lived in Washington, D.C. (1861-62). He moved to New York, where he was appointed customs inspector on the New York docks. This work secured him a regular income. Melville's oldest son committed suicide in 1867.

Melville's later works include *BATTLE-PIECES AND ASPECTS OF THE WAR* (1865), privately printed *JOHN MARR AND OTHER SAILORS* (1888), and *TIMOLEON* (1891). Melville's death on September 28, 1891, in New York, was noted with only one obituary notice. His unfinished work, *Billy Budd, Foretopman*, remained unpublished until 1924. A definitive edition appeared in 1962. This story, which Freud would have loved, is set in 1797 during the war between England and France. Billy Budd, 'the Handsome Sailor', is favorite of the crew of HMS *Bellipotent*. He becomes the target of John Claggart, the satanic master-at-arms, whose character bears similarities to Ahab. Claggart accuses falsely Billy of being involved in a supposed mutiny. The innocent Billy, who is unable to answer the charge because of a chronic stammer, accidentally kills Claggart. Captain Vere sees through Claggart's plot, fears reaction among the crew, if Billy is not punished. He calls a court and in effect instructs it to find Billy guilty of capital crime. The court condemns Billy, who goes willingly to his fate and is hanged from the yardarm after crying out 'God bless Captain Vere'. Later Vere is killed during an engagement with the French, murmuring as his last words Billy's name.

For further reading: *Herman Melville* by William Ellery Sedgwick (1944); *Call Me Ishmael* by Charles Olson (1947); *Herman Melville* by Richard Volney Chase (1949); *Reading of 'Moby-Dick'* by Milton Oswin Percival (1950); *The Long Encounter* by Merlin Bowen (1960); *Melville's Thematic of Form* by Edgar A. Dryden (1968); *Melville: The Ironic Diagram* by John Seelye (1970); *Hawthorne, Melville, and the Novel* by Richard H. Brodhead (1976); *New Perspectives on Melville*, ed. by Faith Pullin (1978); *Melville* by Edward H. Rosenberry (1979); *Herman Melville*, ed. by A. Robert Lee (1984); *A Companion to Melville Studies*, ed. by John Bryant (1986); *White Lies* by John Samson (1989); *Empire for Liberty: Melville and the Poetics of Individualism* by Wai-

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chee Dimock (1991); *Herman Melville* by Rebecca Stefoff (1994); *After the Whale* by Clark Davis (1995); *Herman Melville's Moby-Dick*, ed. by Harold Bloom (1996); *Herman Melville: A Biography: 1819-1851* by Hershel Parker (1996); *The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. by Robert S. Levine (1998, paperback); *Herman Melville's Religious Journey* by Walter Donald Kring (1998); *American Palestine: Melville, Twain, and the Holy Land Mania* by Hilton Obenzinger (1999); *Hunting Captain Ahab: Psychological Warfare and the Melville Revival* by Clare Spark (2001); *Herman Melville: A Biography: 1851-1891* by Hershel Parker (2002); *Melville* by Andrew Delbanco (2005); *The Passages of H. M.: A Novel of Herman Melville* by Jay Parini (2010); *Why Read Moby-Dick?* by Nathaniel Philbrick (2011) - **See also:** Little Blue Light; Eugenio Montale. **19th century writers criticizing colonial system:** Cuban José Martí and Multatuli, whose novel *Max Havelaar* (1860) depicts the Dutch exploitation in Java.

Selected works:

- TYPEE, 1846
 - Taipii: kappale polynesialaisten elämää (suom. Risto Lehmusoksa, 1973)
 - Films: Last of the Pagans (1935), dir. Richard Thorpe, screenplay John Farrow, starring Mala, Lotus Long Enchanted Island (1958), dir. Allan Dwan, screenplay James Leicester, Harold Jacob Smith, Albert Stillman, starring Dana Andrews, Jane Powell; As Ilhas Encantadas (1965), dir. Carlos Vilardebó
- OMOO, 1847
 - Omu: seikkailukertomus Etelämereltä (suom. Antero Tiusanen, 1991)
 - Film: Omoo-Omoo the Shark God (1949), dir. Leon Leonard, screenplay George Green, Leon Leonard, starring Ron Randell, Devera Burton, Trevor Bardette
- REDBURN, HIS FIRST VOYAGE, 1849
 - Redburn: ensimmäinen merimatka (suom. Antero Tiusanen, 1996)
- MARDI AND A VOYAGE THITHER, 1849
- WHITE-JACKET, 1850
 - Valkotakki, eli, Maa ilma sotalaivassa (suom. Antero Tiusanen, 2006)
- MOBY-DICK: OR THE WHALE, 1851
 - Valkoinen valas (suom. Arvi Nuormaa, 1928) / Valkoinen valas (suom. Eino Auer, 1929) / Moby Dick, eli, Valkoinen valas (suom. Seppo Virtanen, 1956) / Moby Dick (suom. Antero Tiusanen, 2002)
 - Several film adaptations: The Sea Beast (1926), dir. Millard Webb, starring John Barrymore; Moby Dick (1930), dir. Lloyd Bacon, starring John Barrymore; Dämon des Meeres (1931), dir. Michael Curtiz, starring William Dieterle; Moby Dick (1956), dir. John Huston, screenplay by John Huston and Ray Bradbury, starring Gregory Peck, Richard Basehart, Frederick Ledebur, Leo Genn, and Orson Welles; Moby Dick (1978), dir. Paul Stanley; Moby Dick (1998), TV mini-series, dir. Franc Roddam, starring Henry Thomas, Patrick Stewart,

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Gregory Peck; *Moby Dick* (1999), short film, dir. Orson Welles; *Capitaine Achab* (2004), dir. Philippe Ramos, starring Frédéric Bonpart; *Capitaine Ahab* (2007), dir. Philippe Ramos, starring Denis Lavant, Jacques Bonnaffé; *Age of the Dragons* (2011), dir. Ryan Little, starring Danny Glover, Vinnie Jones and Corey Sevier. **'Moby Dick was the most difficult picture I ever made. I lost so many battles during it that I even began to suspect that my assistant director was plotting against me. Then I realized that it was only God. God had a perfectly good reason. Ahab saw the White Whale as a mask worn by the Deity, and he saw the Deity as a malignant force. It was God's pleasure to torment and torture man. Ahab didn't deny God, he simply looked on him as a murderer - a thought that is utterly blasphemous: "Is Ahab Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?...Where do murderers go?... Who's to doom, when the judge himself is dragged to the bar?"'** (John Huston in *An Open Book*, 1980)

- PIERRE, OR THE AMBIGUITIES, 1852
- BARTLEBY THE SCRIVENER, 1853
 - *Bartleby* (suom. Juhani Lindholm, 1999)
 - Films: *Bartleby* (1970), dir. Anthony Friedman, starring John McEnery; *Bartleby* (1970), dir. Jean-Pierre Bastid, starring Jean-Pierre Lajournade; *Bartleby* (1976), dir. Maurice Ronet, starring Maxence Mailfort; *Bartleby ou Les hommes au rebut* (1993), dir. Véronique Tacquin; *Bartleby* (2001), dir. Jonathan Parkers starring Crispin Glover; *Bartleby - Geschichte der Wall Street* (2010), TV film, dir. Andreas Honneth, starring James Thiérrée, Georges Claisse and Heinz-Werner Kraehkamp
- THE ENCANTADAS BENITO CERENO, 1855
 - Films: *Benito Cereno* (1967), TV film, in NET Playhouse; *Benito Cereno* (1969), dir. Serge Roullet, screenplay Serge Roullet, starring Ruy Guerra, Georges Selmark, Tamour Diop, Gino Turini
- ISRAEL POTTER, 1855
- THE PIAZZA TALES, 1856
 - *Lumotut saaret ja muita kertomuksia* (suom. Antero Tiusanen, 1999)
- THE CONFIDENCE-MAN, 1857
- BATTLE-PIECES AND ASPECTS OF THE WAR, 1866
- JOHN MARR, AND OTHER SAILORS; WITH SOME SEA-PIECES, 1888
- TIMOLEON, 1891
- BILLY BUDD, 1924 (*Billy Budd, Sailor: An Inside Narrative*; ed. Harrison Hayford and Merton M Sealts Jr., 1962)
 - *Billy Budd* (suom. Meri Utrio, 1964)
 - Films: *Billy Budd* (1962), dir. Peter Ustinov, starring Robert Ryan, Terence Stamp, Peter Ustinov, Melvyn Douglas (see also E.M. Forster); *Beau travail* (1999), dir. Claire Denis, starring Denis Lavant, Michel Subor, Grégoire Colin
- FAMILY CORRESPONDENCE OF HERMAN MELVILLE, 1976 (reprint of the 1929 ed.)

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- ENTER ISABEL: THE HERMAN MELVILLE CORRESPONDENCE OF CLARE SPARK AND PAUL METCALF, 1991 (edited and annotated by Paul Metcalf)
- COLLECTED POEMS, 1993 (ed. Howard P. Vincent)
- THE COMPLETE SHORTER FICTION, 1997 (with an introduction by John Updike)

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