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The Whale in the World: Using  
Moby-Dick in a General Education  
Course

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# THE WHALE IN THE WORLD: USING *MOBY-DICK* IN A GENERAL EDUCATION COURSE

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## Abstract

*Moby-Dick* is perhaps the best known novel in American literature, yet it is generally considered a daunting read, even for English majors in advanced courses. However, I believe that *Moby-Dick* is a text well suited for introductory courses, not merely in literature but in general education courses. The real subject of *Moby-Dick* is knowledge itself, and the novel can help introduce students to the educational mission of colleges and universities. *Moby-Dick* also emphasizes the lasting power of literature in one's life-long education.

## Introduction

On the first page of Herman Melville's whaling masterpiece, before anyone has asked to be called "Ishmael" and before any hint of the mad Captain Ahab's pursuit of the White Whale has been introduced, *Moby-Dick* opens with a chapter called "Etymology" and includes an odd quotation: "When you take it in hand to school others, and to teach them by what name a whale-fish is to be called in our tongue, leaving out, through ignorance, the letter H, which almost alone maketh up the signification of the word, you deliver that which is not true" (7).

Attributed to Richard Hakluyt, this caveat is less about the etymology of the word *whale* than it is about problems of education, of knowledge, of language, of what Melville elsewhere calls "the great Art of Telling the Truth" ("Hawthorne and his Mosses," 224). Indeed, with this starting point, *Moby-Dick* can be viewed as a novel that

specifically invites thinking about the role of knowledge and education in our lives. The mission of the novel thus affirms that of college or university education as a whole: to expand knowledge, to acquire and hone critical skills, and to better understand the world and our roles in it. Far from being a daunting old tome relegated to senior-level seminars and graduate courses, this novel provides an apt point of departure for entry-level college students by exploring the power of literature in making sense of the world.

### **“To manhandle this Leviathan”**

Throughout *Moby-Dick*, Melville seems almost obsessed with the notion that this novel must include *everything*; that is, it must leave nothing out. As the Hakluyt quotation suggests, if “through ignorance” something is left out, then what gets “delivered” is not *true*. Edward Said has suggested that the novel is really about “the whole world” (369). Melville himself, in a chapter called “The Fossil Whale,” indicates that the project goes well beyond telling a story about Ishmael, Ahab, or the White Whale: “Since I have undertaken to manhandle this Leviathan, it behoves me to approve myself omnisciently exhaustive in the enterprise; not overlooking the minutest seminal germs of his blood, and spinning him out to the uttermost coil of his bowels” (349). Melville goes even further, adding that the work’s “outreaching comprehensiveness of sweep” would “include the whole circle of the sciences, and all the generations of whales, and men, and mastodons, past, present, and to come, with all the revolving panoramas of empire on earth, and throughout the whole universe, not excluding its suburbs” (349).

With its outrageously ambitious attempt to understand and to present absolutely everything, *Moby-Dick* is a figurative university education in itself. The novel affords numerous points of entry into a general exploration of literature, history, philosophy, science, and world cultures. In teaching of *Moby-Dick*, one can move back and forth between close, textual analysis and broader cultural issues. This method—involving close reading of various chapters to open up avenues for discussions of aesthetics, politics, and history—highlights the interplay between language and the culture or cultures as a whole. Thus, a chapter like “The Whiteness of the Whale” can open up discussions on literary symbolism and historical significance, not only with respect to the multiple meanings of the color white in *Moby-Dick* but in various cultures as well. “Fast Fish and Loose Fish” invites a discussion of world history, colonization, and conquest. “The Advocate” opens up a discussion of American democracy and its role in the world. “The Symphony” calls forth arguments about fate and agency. “The Doubloon” gives a crash course of polysemy and interpretation. And “Chowder” makes one really want to eat a bowl of chowder. As a work that is *about* everything, *Moby-Dick* allows for classroom discussions of how we know and represent ourselves and the world around us.

*Moby-Dick* also provides the occasion to think about the *novel* as a form unto itself. Arguably, Melville’s opus is not really a novel, at least not a traditional one. Itself an *extravagant* literary production, *Moby-Dick* wanders out of bounds of established genres, invoking the classical epic and the Shakespearean tragedy, combining encyclopedic discourses and poetic revelations. In the course of the novel, the narrator will take on the role of schoolteacher, sailor, food critic, art historian, geologist, biologist,

psychologist, poet, playwright, on and on. *Moby-Dick* is, in the words of a contemporary reviewer, “an intellectual chowder of romance, philosophy, natural history, fine writing, good feelings, [and] bad sayings” (Duyckinck, 610-611). The novel’s lush, poetic language rewards close reading, and its expansive scope encourages careful considerations of other areas of knowledge. By examining the multiple forms and styles of the novel, students can explore different aspects of the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences.

### **“A whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard”**

Of course, this extravagance of *Moby-Dick* is also a source of consternation for many students, who wonder just what the heck is going on. Why does Ishmael, who seemed absolutely central to the story at first, completely disappear for a few hundred pages? How can the narrator be a character in the narrative at some times and, at others, leave the scene altogether or enter into the minds of other characters? Why are some chapters written like plays, with stage directions, and others like textbooks? Why is there a complete, self-contained short story right in the middle of the novel? And so on. These problems often lead to productive and fascinating discussions. For example, some of my students have complained about what they view as the many digressions in the text, wondering why so much cetological detail is allowed to interfere with the plot. This question itself presupposes a plot that is distinct from Melville’s cetology, suggesting that the “main” story is that of Ahab or of Ishmael, not of “the Whale.” Are these really *digressions*, or are they integral to what the book is all about? What is happening in these

cetological chapters? How are these chapters related to the more straightforwardly narrative ones? Perhaps the Ishmael plot is the real digression, taking the reader away from the main text of “the Whale,” to which so much space is devoted? Franco Moretti has suggested that, in the “modern epic” (a generic category that includes *Moby-Dick*), rather than diverting the reader’s attention away from the main action, “digressions have themselves become the main purpose of epic Action” (49). From a pedagogical standpoint, I have often found that these “digressions” become fertile ground for the most interesting discussions.

In his exuberant panegyric to the glory of whaling, Melville (or Ishmael) says that if he ever does anything remarkable—writes “a precious MSS.,” for example—the honor should go to the whaling industry, for “a whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard” (*Moby-Dick* 101). The education afforded to Melville at sea is also the education put forth in the novel itself. *Moby-Dick*, to the frustration of many students and readers, is not interested in simply telling the story of “a whaling voyage by one Ishmael” (22); it is not a novel in that sense. It contains this story, and many others, in an encyclopedic work that would include such tales only as part of the overall education. Yes, we learn (as Ishmael does) about whaling, about friendship (with Queequeg, for instance), about madness and terror; but we also find ourselves studying literature, politics, philosophy, biology, and art history. Rather than offer a course, *Moby-Dick* offers a curriculum.

Wherever feasible, I like to conduct class as a discussion. I believe that by engaging in group discussions, students take a stronger interest in the texts, both as topics

of discussion and as jumping-off points for consideration of other subjects. Sometimes, I may give formal presentations or impromptu lectures in order to provide context or background information that may not be immediately available to the students, but generally discussion is the preferred method. With *Moby-Dick*, as I suggested above, this process is facilitated by a rich text that includes an almost limitless source of possible topics. (For example, I have had students approach the novel as a nonfiction work of marine biology or as a sociological allegory of the rise of industrialization and the decline of agrarian culture.) In class discussion, students are encouraged to generate ideas that can often become topics for papers, allowing them to develop their own readings and approaches to the humanities. In my own case, *Moby-Dick* allowed a young philosophy major who was focusing his studies on Kant, Nietzsche, and Foucault to open his mind to the possibilities of literature (especially American literature) as a way of understanding the world in which we live. In addition to all my other formal training, a whale-ship—*Moby-Dick* itself—became my Yale College and my Harvard, too.

**“I want to see what whaling is. I want to see the world”**

When Ishmael tells Captain Peleg why he wants to go whaling, the old retired whaler mocks him, directing the naive sailor to the front of the ship to see what he could of the world from that vantage. Pointing to the open ocean, the “prospect was unlimited, but exceedingly monotonous and forbidding” (*Moby-Dick*, 71-72). Students may find that Melville’s novel could be described the same way. Yet, by the end of the novel, Ishmael and the reader have indeed seen the world, a world that is vastly more extensive

and mysterious than one to be experienced through an easygoing tourist cruise. The student who makes the effort to see what whaling is in *Moby-Dick* will also get to see the world.

Of course, the great Leviathan, the *whale* itself, supplies the most apt figure for the world. So large as to be nearly incomprehensible, the whale is that thing that we are always trying to understand more fully but that also eludes our grasp. The more we know of it, the better, but we cannot ever definitively complete our studies. We continue learning. In the text of *Moby-Dick*, Melville gives many examples. His cetological system remains “but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught” (125), and he warns that the whale “is that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last” (218). Yet, despite these failures, Melville assiduously keeps trying, following the Hakluyt admonition not to leave anything out through ignorance, but to seek out the truth, chapter after chapter, in the anatomy, archaeology, biology, history, literature, philosophy, and social science of whales and whaling. The “whole circle of the sciences,” throughout the universe, not even excluding its suburbs.... Melville’s uncategorizable *Whale* (the original title which became the sub- or alternate title) is really of the whole world. As such, it is a text supremely suited for introducing students to the world in a university.

## **Conclusion**

I believe that literature operates as a form of mapping, as a way of getting our bearings in a complex and often confusing world. The literary text is a form-giving form,

enabling the writer and the reader to shape their relations to the larger world and plot their course in it. My overall goal in an introductory course is to expose students to the possibilities of literature as a means of making sense of the world. This means engendering in students a love of literature that, one hopes, will endure beyond my course and beyond their university studies. With *Moby-Dick* as a touchstone in this endeavor, I hope to encourage critical and independent thinking that students can carry with them in any discipline or profession, in college or elsewhere. At a time when the humanities in general do not get quite the respect that they once did, *Moby-Dick*, in its exhortation to inspect every detail while also exploring the big picture, provides one example of the plenary power of literature to guide us in the age of globalization. Perhaps Melville's citation of Richard Hakluyt—himself a geographer whose mappings opened up a New World to his readers—is an apt figure for the role of the novel in a university education: if you leave something out, you may deliver that which is not true.

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