

**The Moby-Dick Reading Group at the Rosenbach
Summer 2018**
Alexander Eisenthal, University of Pennsylvania



“by *Moby-Dick* Melville has created for himself a total philosophy of life to replace the one he has rejected. It is not organized, but it is not in the slightest degree unconscious.”

C.L.R. James

“*The White Whale*...is America, all of her space, the malice, the root.”

Charles Olson

“in his fixed look at the vulture universe, the consuming, he unrolls before us the image of a system.”

Muriel Rukeyser

May 19th *Leaving*

Etymology – Ch. 23, “The Lee Shore”

Ishmael goes to sea out of restlessness and ennui. An introduction to Melville’s life and career will show how the writer himself was drawn seawards multiple times for the very same reasons. Melville was also involved in the “Young America” movement, a group of writers and thinkers from the 1840s who declared their own restlessness as a political principle. We will examine the various ways that Melville and his contemporaries struck out into the world – through maritime adventure, colonial expansion, and transatlantic voyages. An overview of some of Melville’s earlier, shorter novels (*Typee*, *Omoo*, and *Redburn*) will help to contextualize the opening of *Moby-Dick*, and we will think about how Melville took the literary image of the young man seeking adventure and mixed it with the political problems and possibilities of his own day.

June 23rd *Thinking*

Ch. 24 :”The Advocate – Ch. 42, “The Whiteness of the White Whale”

Once the *Pequod* hoists anchor, Melville launches into philosophical quandaries with a deceptively light touch. We will unravel the philosophical references that are dotted throughout these chapters. We will talk about Kant’s and Burke’s ideas of the sublime as we discuss the way that the ocean and the leviathan figure the very limits of what humans can think. We will also discuss the influence of theologians like Sir Thomas Browne and William Paley on Melville’s writing, as well as literary precedents for the possibilities and pitfalls of the imagination in John Milton and William Blake. We will also take a look at the immense influence of William Shakespeare on Melville’s prose, which helps to explain why reading Melville is so different from the experience of reading other novels of the time.

July 21st *Calculating*

Ch 43 “Hark!” – Ch. 60 “The Line”

In order to pursue the white whale, and catch other whales on the way, Melville’s crew used the technology of their time. Examining the ocean charts mentioned in *Moby-Dick* will allow us to talk about the practical ramifications of the discussions of fate and free will that occur throughout the book. We will talk about probability, statistics, the law of large numbers, and the way they entice Ahab with an elusive promise of mastery that is not ultimately attainable. As we do so, we will find that *Moby-Dick* does not pit art against science, but brings them together.

In this, Melville was more like the Romantic poets whom he admired (Shelley, Byron) than he was akin to the other major novelists of the nineteenth century (Dickens, Dostoevsky). Our discussion of these middle chapters in *Moby-Dick* will bring us to consider how the apparent opposites of romantic art and technological reasoning come together in Melville's writing.

August 18th *Working*

Ch. 61 "Stubb kills a Whale" – Ch. 86 "The Tail"

As Ishmael reminds us in the very first chapter: "there is all the difference in the world between paying and being paid." The powerful symbolism of Ahab and the white whale can distract us from the fact that *Moby-Dick* is also a book about work, hierarchy, and industrial organization. During this meeting, we will talk about the division of labor that we see in *Moby-Dick*, and its relation to the nineteenth-century social order. We will talk about why the slavery question became a political crisis in the years after the Mexican-American war, and about the radical new ideas of the 1848 revolutions that fascinated Melville. We will compare Melville's politics to some of his contemporaries (Whitman, Emerson, Lincoln, Douglass) and we will also talk about what kinds of work and workforce were involved in the New England whaling industry, which combined highly-organized industry with more primal elements of the chase and the hunt.

September 15th *Agreeing*

Ch. 87 "The Grand Armada" – Ch. 114 "The Gilder"

In the "Extracts" that appear at the start of *Moby-Dick*, Melville quotes from Thomas Hobbes *Leviathan*, a political tract that used the Biblical image of the sea monster to discuss sovereignty and political order. The relationship between "Knights and Squires" as Melville puts it, is constantly in question throughout the book. In this meeting we will look at *Moby-Dick* as an allegory for various different political systems, and we will look at how Melville brought the idea of contract – an ascendant idea in mid-nineteenth century America – into conjunction with other ideas of oath-taking, compulsion, and coercion. To do this, we will talk about Hobbes and Locke, but we will also pay close attention to the relationships amongst *Moby-Dick*'s characters, to examine how Melville put abstract ideas into motion.

October 20th *Arguing*

Ch. 112 “The Blacksmith” -- Epilogue

As we reach the end of our own quest for the white whale, we will explore the ambivalent ending of Melville’s work and discuss the resultant interpretations that have used *Moby-Dick* to argue about the meaning of American history. *Moby-Dick* was a failure in its day, and did not become famous until the “Melville Revival” in the 1920s. In the 1930s, leftist critics used Melville’s celebration of interdependency to push back against a history of American ideas that emphasised individualism over community. In the 1950s, cold warriors argued to the contrary that *Moby-Dick* showed the importance of American individualism against the conformity foisted upon people by a tyrant, enlisting Melville for the ideological struggle against communist totalitarianism. Our final meeting will allow us to look at *Moby-Dick* in its entirety and discuss how it could produce such different interpretations of American values in the twentieth century, We will also argue ourselves about the relative emphases Melville placed on individualism and collectivity.

Required Text:

Moby-Dick, or, The Whale (Penguin, 2003) ISBN 9780142437247

Andrew Delbanco’s introduction is helpful reading. The Norton 2nd edition also has useful supplement materials for reference purposes.

Suggested Biographies:

Andrew Delbanco, *Melville, his world and work* (Random House, 2005)

A clear, readable, well-written introduction to Melville’s life and work, introducing the themes Melville derived from the social transformations he lived through between 1819 and 1891.

Elizabeth Hardwick, *Herman Melville* (Viking, 2000)

Another very useful overview, the most concise offering of the lot.

Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography 2 Vols.* (Johns Hopkins, 2005)

The most comprehensive Melville biography. Scrupulously follows Melville’s journals and correspondence. Better suited to reference than to reading cover-to-cover.

Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (University of California, 1985)

Not a biography, exactly, but provides a wealth of biographical information as it examines the connections between literature and politics. Uses the history of the Melville and Gansevoort families to explain how Herman Melville depicted a fundamental crisis at the heart of nineteenth-century American society.