

# Individual Learning Packet

## Teaching Unit

# Moby Dick

by Herman Melville

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## Notes

Herman Melville was born on August 1, 1819, in New York. He was a voracious reader, especially of Shakespeare, and these influences can be seen in *Moby-Dick*. Melville went to sea in 1839, and in 1842, he spent some time on an island in the South Pacific with friendly cannibals before joining a whaler. In 1844, he returned to the United States, where he began a close friendship with Nathaniel Hawthorne. *Moby-Dick* was published in 1851 to mild misunderstanding, but not much success. Melville died in 1891, nearly forgotten by his critics and his contemporaries.

Note to Teacher: Definitions of vocabulary words are restricted to the more common words students may encounter. Many editions of this book include a hyphen in the title *Moby-Dick; or The Whale* and text. Others do not. Pictures of the First Edition, published in 1851, however, do show the hyphen, which is the way it is used in this Teaching Unit. We have also consistently capitalized *Sperm Whale* in the Unit, as this is the way it appears in the book.

## Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. define and cite examples from the text of numerous literary terms.
2. write a character analysis of Ahab.
3. define various vocabulary words from the text.
4. infer meanings about *Moby-Dick* which are not directly stated.
5. follow the complicated style of Melville.
6. discuss various interpretations of Ahab's obsession.
7. compare and contrast as they appear in *Moby-Dick*:
  - good and evil
  - black and white
  - life and death
8. enumerate the causes of Ahab's desire to kill the whale.
9. define various nautical terms.
10. recognize and explain some of the many allusions to:
  - the Bible
  - Shakespeare
  - History
  - Mythology
11. discuss the ambiguities in the book, specifically:
  - Queequeg's beliefs in the power of the mind to heal
  - reasons why Starbuck does not kill Ahab when the opportunity presents itself
  - the nature of Fedallah
  - Ishmael's survival
12. compare and contrast:
  - "The Savage" and the civilized
  - Pip and Ahab
  - Starbuck and Stubb
  - Ahab and other whaling captains
  - Ahab and *Moby-Dick*
  - Ahab and Starbuck

### Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. One critic has stated, “Throughout Melville’s *Moby-Dick* we find the ‘savages’—Queequeg, Tashtego, Daggoo, and others—acting with a degree of civility which meets and often surpasses that of their fellow sailors.” Write a compare and contrast essay using the above as your thesis statement. Remember to cite textual examples.
2. Ishmael, at one point, says that his choice of a whaler was not of his own free will. What influences does he cite for his choice?
3. In Chapter three, Ishmael describes a painting hanging on the wall of the Spouter Inn. What relevance does this painting have to the book as a whole?
4. What is the thematic function of Fedallah?
5. Evaluate the system of whale classification that Ishmael proposes in Chapter thirty-two. Does it have any validity in spite of its misconceptions, obsolete notions, and anthropomorphisms? Why or why not?
6. Supply some examples of foreshadowing as it is used by Ishmael throughout *Moby-Dick*.
7. In your opinion, is the mysterious “Spirit-Spout” of Chapter fifty-one actually Moby-Dick?
8. In Chapter fifty-eight, Ishmael observes that the population at large considers the sea to be more dangerous than the land. What reasoning does he base this assertion on? Do you agree with him?
9. Biblical references are spread liberally throughout the novel, in locations, themes, allegories, and even characters’ names. Write an essay explaining those references that strike you as most relevant to the novel.
10. In Chapter nine, considerable time is spent on an interpretation of the story of the biblical Jonah. How does this story relate to the novel, and to Ahab in particular?
11. Explain whether or not Moby-Dick’s actions are anthropomorphic.
12. Defend or refute the following statement:  
Ahab’s monomania stems from the loss of his leg to the white whale.
13. How do the following pairs of terms fit some of the themes of *Moby-Dick*?
  - the struggle between good and evil
  - distinctions between darkness and light
  - life and death

# Moby Dick

## Chapters 1 and 2

### VOCABULARY

**cataract** – a waterfall  
**circumambulate** – to walk around  
**congealed** – gelled; solidified  
**dubious** – doubtful  
**extant** – in existence  
**infallibly** – without error  
**insular** – island-like; isolated  
**involuntarily** – without willingness  
**metaphysical** – supernatural  
**palsied** – shaky  
**tribulation** – a problem, difficulty

1. What reason does Ishmael give for going to sea? What is important about his name?

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2. Name the three positions that Ishmael does *not* wish to occupy aboard ship.

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3. Why does Ishmael go as a sailor, rather than as a passenger?

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## Chapters 15 and 16

### VOCABULARY

acquiesce – to give in  
asserted – swore  
impenitent – not sorry  
indolence – laziness  
innuendo – hint  
oblique – indirect  
sagacity – wise knowledge  
sauntering – wandering about  
stultifying – stupid

1. Who refers Queequeg and Ishmael to the Try Pots? Why?

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2. What premonitions does Ishmael have?

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3. On what basis does Mrs. Hussey object to Queequeg's taking his harpoon to his room?

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4. What is the name of Queequeg's idol?

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**Chapters 29, 30, and 31**

VOCABULARY

**confoundedly** – in a confused manner  
**cudgeling** – beating  
**deprecate** – belittle, disapprove  
**haughty** – snobbish  
**sentinelled** – kept watch  
**soliloquized** – talked to oneself  
**taffrail** – rail around stern end of boat  
**winsome** – charming

1. What prompts Stubb to approach Ahab? What is Ahab's reaction

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2. What does Stubb decide to do about Ahab's outburst?

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3. Why does Ahab toss his pipe into the ocean?

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**Chapters 48 and 49**

## VOCABULARY

**bivouacks** – temporary campings  
**celerity** – haste  
**conjecture** – a guess  
**dispirits** – discourages  
**exordium** – beginning remarks  
**inculcating** – urging; stressing  
**legatee** – an inheritor  
**swart** – dark  
**tranquilly** – peacefully

1. Why do Fedallah and his crew immediately raise suspicion aboard the ship?

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2. What makes Stubb's urgings to his crew unique in Ishmael's opinion?

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3. What position does Fedallah have when the boats are lowered?

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4. What is the second mast head that Flask stands on?

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## Chapters 72 and 73

### VOCABULARY

**abated** – slowed  
**apothecary** – a druggist  
**consolatory** – comforting  
**fagged** – exhausted  
**interregnum** – a gap in time  
**ligature** – a tie  
**maelstrom** – a large whirlpool

1. Why is Queequeg obliged to stand on the body of the dead whale?

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2. How does Queequeg's position endanger Ishmael?

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3. Why does Stubb object to the drink that Dough-boy hands Queequeg after his time on the whale?

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**Chapters 100 and 101**

VOCABULARY

**auspices** – support; protection  
**burly** – big and strong  
**decanter** – a holder for liquid  
**facetious** – humorous  
**feints** – pretenses  
**flailings** – thrashings  
**indefatigable** – untiring  
**lancet** – a blood-letting instrument

1. Why does Ahab get along well with the captain of the *Samuel Enderby*?

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2. How did the other captain lose his arm?

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3. Why did the English ship not lower the boats in their subsequent encounters with Moby-Dick?

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