

## Extended Background

### *Melville's Whaling World*

Whaling quickly came into prominence as a main industry in New England in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In an era before electricity, whales were sought for their oil, which was used to burn lamps and lubricate machinery in a time of increasing industrialization. As the oil of sperm whales was particularly valuable, American whalers ventured farther and farther out to sea in search of this species. Eventually, American whaling ships circled the globe on increasingly long journeys. Conditions on board the ships were rarely pleasant, as the crew grew more and more isolated from society. Quarters were cramped and vermin abounded.

Whaling ships did offer one of the most racially integrated environments of the time, and all members of the crew were equally susceptible to unpleasant punishments from the ship's officers. The increasing popularity of petroleum, dangers of war vessels at sea, and increased efficiency of other industries caused the decline of American whaling in the final quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Links to media rich resources on the 19<sup>th</sup>-century whaling experience are available in the unit overview under Extending the Unit.

### *Allusions*

Melville's *Moby-Dick* holds more allusions than would be practical to identify here. Below are two students will encounter in the unit: the Fates and the Iron Crown of Lombardy.

#### The Fates

Both of Melville's main characters in *Moby-Dick* (Captain Ahab and Ishmael) believe in beings that may be controlling their fate in the world. The Fates (or the "Moirai" from the Greek words for "apportioners") are three sisters in classical mythology who control the destiny (thread of life) of every human being. The Fates were known for their severity and unwavering control over the course of every mortal's life, and even sometimes the lives of the gods.

Ishmael references a "stage manager" of his life, one who directs him through it. This harkens back to Jacques's soliloquy in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*: "All the world's a stage / And all the men and women merely players." Ahab's relationship with the Fates is more complex. Though he calls himself "the Fates lieutenant; I act under orders" there is an abiding ambivalence about it. He is not certain how much control he actually exerts over his own destiny.

#### The Iron Crown of Lombardy

The Iron Crown of Lombardy is a gold crown said to contain a nail from the cross of Jesus's crucifixion. The nail has been hammered out to form a band within the crown. When Captain Ahab references the crown in his dramatic monologue, he is speaking about both royalty in general (symbolic of the burden of power) and this exceptional crown in particular. By choosing a relic crown, he makes himself not simply a king, but a king ordained by God. Captain Ahab thus gives himself divine sovereignty over both his ship and his quest against the whale. This sovereignty will be questioned by the novel's ending.

## **Melville's "Moby-Dick": Shifts in Narrative Voice and Literary Genres**

By employing this reference, Melville brings into focus one of the novel's themes: man's inability to crown himself—to fully declare his own path in life. This philosophy is supported by Ishmael in the opening chapter.

### ***Literary Genres***

Melville self-consciously integrates a number of literary genres throughout his text to help tell the story, *Moby-Dick*. Below are brief general descriptions of several genres that students will encounter in Lesson 3 of the unit: hymns, sermons, scientific, and dramatic writing.

#### **Hymns**

Hymns have been a part of many Christian traditions since their inception. In eras with literacy rates much lower than today, hymns were important mechanisms for spreading messages of the Bible. In *Moby-Dick*, hymns—and indeed any songs—are easy to identify because Melville sets their verse apart from his prose.

#### **Sermons**

Sermons held a prominent position in early American writing, dating back to Jonathan Edwards and the early Puritan settlers. Clergy members preaching sermons typically intended to deliver a moral axiom to their congregation. Melville's inclusion of a sermon in *Moby-Dick* allows him to portray morals of the day without making Ishmael subscribe to or comment on these morals.

#### **Scientific writing**

Though no scientist, Melville as a self-taught naturalist incorporates elements of scientific writing throughout the novel. Many have questioned the accuracy of much of Melville's "Cetology," (the branch of marine mammal science devoted to the study of whales). Teachers should point out to their students that Melville's science writing can veer into literary fiction, as he includes literary elements in his "Cetology" chapter. Nevertheless, it proves more blandly informative than his other scientific chapters.

#### **Dramatic writing**

Melville allows the dramatic genre to overtake *Moby-Dick* for a few chapters. He uses a script format, with stage directions for movement and the characters delivering lines. This allows Melville to offer readers access to the inner thoughts of some of his characters without having Ishmael fully relinquish his narrative power. These chapters serve as a transition for the narrative's focus from Ishmael's odyssey at sea to Ahab's quest. While Ishmael maintains his narrative authority, Ahab and his pursuit of the whale becomes the driving force of the novel.

Within these dramatic chapters, Melville gives Captain Ahab a soliloquy or dramatic monologue. Early Modern dramatists such as Shakespeare and his contemporaries, frequently employed this technique to convey the innermost thoughts of their characters. In the same way an actor would be alone on stage, Ahab is alone in his quarters. Melville furthers the comparison with early modern drama by writing the speech in archaic language. This moment gives readers privileged glimpses into Ahab's thoughts. This is a window into Ahab that Ishmael would not be able to access alone.

**Melville's "Moby-Dick": Shifts in Narrative Voice and Literary Genres**

Additional resources for characteristics and structures of these literary genres:

Hymn: See [The Hymn as Literature](#) from [Christian Classics Ethereal Library](#).

Sermon: See [Sermon Structures](#) from [ConcordiaTheology.org](#).

Scientific writing: See [Scientific Writing](#) especially [Traits of Scientific Writing](#) and [Evaluating for the Traits](#) available from [Dr. Brian Nowak-Thompson](#) at Cornell College, Iowa.

Drama: See [Drama](#) from [The Writing Center](#) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.