



## Moby-Dick, by Herman Melville

### In A Nutshell

*Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville's 1851 novel, tells the story of obsessed Captain Ahab's quest for revenge on the White Whale as observed by a common seaman who identifies himself only as Ishmael. In the past century and a half, this novel has achieved legendary status. *Moby-Dick* is probably second only to *War and Peace* as a cultural byword for a long, difficult book that unnerves even the most gung-ho readers with its web of digressions and literary and cultural references.

When the novel was first published, reviewers and readers alike were, at best, puzzled by its density and, at worst, offended by its religious and sexual allusions. It was the so-called "Melville Revival" of the early twentieth century that placed *Moby-Dick* on every critic's short list of great American novels (or great novels from any culture, for that matter). Even those who've never read a word of *Moby-Dick* often recognize the book's famous first line, "Call me Ishmael," or the plot device of an insane quest for vengeance on an aspect of the natural world.

*Moby-Dick* has been referenced in popular culture throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, showing up in everything from a Led Zeppelin song to *The Simpsons* to *Star Trek*. There are many different adaptations of *Moby-Dick* in a variety of genres, most notably a 1956 film starring Gregory Peck as Captain Ahab and a 1998 TV miniseries with Patrick Stewart in the same role. Both these adaptations get a bad rap because they can't reproduce the language and structure of Melville's novel. In fact, there's really no substitute for this book, and reading

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Visit Shmoop for full coverage of *Moby-Dick*

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it can make a whole new side of American culture visible.

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## Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Is Ishmael fated to take his voyage on the *Pequod*, or is it a choice? Is Ahab fated to be locked in combat with Moby Dick, or could he opt out of his quest for revenge? In general, what roles do fate and prophecy play in shaping the ways *Moby-Dick's* characters behave?
- 2 Why does this novel shift so much in point-of-view? Why does it sometimes take on the formal characteristics of a play?
- 3 People often claim that *Moby-Dick* has two kinds of chapters - the ones that actually advance the plot, and the ones that give background information on whaling. After reading the novel, what do you think of this distinction? Are there other ways to classify *Moby-Dick's* chapters?

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