

tuality that irritates him, and their apparent innocence is sometimes a mask for deceptiveness. Despite their protestations they are cannibals, and they are also determined to keep the hero a captive in the valley. Clearly, if this is Eden, it is an Eden which the serpent has already entered. Penetrating back to nature in its simplest form, the hero discovers that the seed of evil has already been sown. This simultaneous attraction to, and suspicion of, natural life is one of the deepest tensions of Melville's art: it becomes a central theme in his greatest work, *Moby Dick*.

Moby Dick

SUMMARY Bored by life on dry land, Ishmael decides to enlist as a whaler. In New Bedford he lodges at 'The Spouter Inn', run by Peter Coffin. Because the place is crowded he agrees to share a room and bed with a harpooner. The harpooner turns out to be a tattooed savage from the South Seas, and Ishmael is at first terrified of him. But Queequeg is friendly and polite and the two soon strike up a friendship. The next morning Ishmael attends a sermon by Father Mapple, a favourite preacher amongst whaling men, who takes the story of Jonah as his text. Ishmael and Queequeg take the ferry to Nantucket, the traditional centre of New England whaling.

At Ishmael's suggestion they sign up on the *Pequod*, an old, grotesquely carved but serviceable ship. As they board they are buttonholed by Elijah, an old sailor, who warns them against Ahab, the captain of the *Pequod*. The owner, Peleg, pilots the ship out of the harbour while Ahab remains below decks in his cabin, unseen by the crew. The *Pequod*'s chief mate is Starbuck, an earnest Nantucket Quaker whose attitude to whaling is purely businesslike. Stubb is the second mate – a fearless, happy-go-lucky fellow, perpetually smoking his pipe. The third mate, Flask, is pugnacious and humorous. Of the three harpooners, Queequeg works in Starbuck's boat, Tashtego, a Red Indian, with Stubb, and Dagoo, an African, with Flask.

Only when the ship is at sea does Ishmael first see Ahab. He is an impressive, brooding figure, with an artificial leg made from whalebone and a white streak down one side of his body, like a lightning-mark. When the *Pequod* reaches warmer waters Ahab addresses the assembled crew. He nails a gold Spanish doubloon to the mast – a prize for the first man to sight Moby Dick, the famous white whale. Moby Dick is an almost legendary creature, incalculably old and supposedly malevolent. It was he who took off Ahab's leg and Ahab has become obsessed with the idea of revenge. This offends Starbuck's business sense; besides, he argues, the whale acted only out of blind instinct in wounding Ahab. But the Captain inflames the crew with his rhetoric and the harpoons are ritually dedicated to killing Moby Dick. Ishmael, too, is swayed, though he later comes to doubt Ahab's sanity.

One day, when Ishmael and Queequeg are on deck together weaving a mat, Tashtego sights a school of sperm whales. The boats are lowered and at the last minute Ahab himself appears to lead a boat of his own; its crew are a group of natives, led by Fedallah, whose presence on board has been kept a secret from the rest of the crew. Because of a squall the chase has to be called off. For several nights afterwards the crew see a ghostly whale-spout in the distance. They also mistake a giant white squid for Moby Dick. Ishmael sights a whale, which Stubb kills. The corpse is moored to the side of the ship and stripped of its blubber. The head is preserved and the rest of the body cast loose for the sharks to devour.

The *Pequod* meets the *Jeroboam* which has a contagious epidemic on board. Its chief mate has been killed in an encounter with Moby Dick. The crew of the *Pequod* drain the valuable spermaceti from the head of the sperm whale they have killed. During this difficult operation Tashtego nearly drowns but is saved by Queequeg. During the pursuit of another whale they only narrowly beat another ship, the *Jungfrau* (or *Virgin*), to the kill. But the whale they harpoon is so heavy that it almost capsizes the ship and has to be cast

loose. In the Java Sea they come upon a herd of whales but manage to kill only one. One of the wounded whales is picked up by the *Rose-Bud*; in answer to the inevitable query from Ahab the captain of the *Rose-Bud* replies that he has not sighted the white whale. Pip, the *Pequod*'s Negro cabin-boy, is killed when he falls from one of the whaling boats. Under Stubb's supervision the ship starts up its try-works — large vats used to boil down whale blubber.

The *Pequod* crosses paths with the *Samuel Enderby* of London. Although its captain, Boomer, has lost an arm to Moby Dick he does not bear the white whale any special grudge. Indeed, he tries to dissuade Ahab from his vengeful quest. Returning to his own ship from the *Samuel Enderby*, Ahab damages his artificial leg, which the ship's carpenter-blacksmith replaces. Queequeg suffers from a fever and has his coffin made. Even when he recovers he still keeps the coffin by him.

When the ship enters the Pacific Ahab has his harpoon sharpened in readiness for the encounter with Moby Dick that he still desperately seeks. They pass the *Bachelor* on its way back to Nantucket after a successful voyage, but Ahab parleys only long enough to learn that there is no news of the white whale. Starbuck, disturbed by his captain's monomania, debates mutiny but suppresses the impulse. Lightning inverts the ship's compasses and Ahab has to make a makeshift substitute. The ominous atmosphere is increased when one of the crew falls from the mast-head into the sea.

A passing whaler, the *Rachel*, reports meeting Moby Dick. Indeed, the whale has sunk a boat containing the captain's son. Rather than help look for survivors Ahab presses on with his chase. Another ship, the *Delight*, has had a boat smashed by Moby Dick. At last the *Pequod* sights the white whale. The chase lasts three days. On the first day Ahab's whale boat is destroyed. On the second, the whale again defeats his hunters and Ahab's artificial leg is broken. On the last day of the confrontation Moby Dick actually sinks the *Pequod* and Ahab, holding on to a harpoon rope, is

dragged off in the wake of the enraged whale. Only Ishmael survives. He floats on Queequeg's coffin and is picked up by the *Rachel*.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY When *Moby Dick* was first published in 1851 its critical reception ranged from indifference to hostility. Even those reviewers who had appreciated Melville's previous books dismissed his new novel in contemptuous and derisive terms. The American *Literary World* called it an 'intellectual chowder', while the English *New Monthly Magazine* called its style 'maniacal — mad as a March hare'. Hawthorne, to whom *Moby Dick* is actually dedicated, was amongst the very few early readers to discern its importance. 'What a book Melville has written!' he wrote to a friend. 'It gives me an idea of much greater power than his preceding ones.'

Posterity, of course, has endorsed Hawthorne's judgement. Today *Moby Dick* is widely regarded as the summit not only of Melville's art but of American nineteenth-century fiction. In his *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923) D. H. Lawrence exclaimed simply: 'It is a great book.' In *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957) Richard Chase can refer to the novel as 'the grandest expression of the American imagination', with the air of a man echoing a truism rather than arguing a case.

Yet the genesis of *Moby Dick* was modest enough. In earlier works Melville had used his own youthful experiences as a sailor as the basis for his stories. No doubt he originally conceived *Moby Dick* in the same vein. It was to be an adventure story using the personal knowledge of whaling that he had acquired during his voyages on the *Acushnet* and the *Charles and Henry* in the 1840s. But as he proceeded, the novel grew in sophistication and complexity. Melville drew on his formidable expertise about the history of whaling, his reading of the Bible and Shakespeare (especially *King Lear*) and his own habit of speculation about the natural universe. The result is a book at once amazingly diverse and brilliantly unified.

How, then, did Melville convert an apparently simple adventure story into so rich and complex an achievement? Much of the answer lies in his use of allegory and symbolism, those favourite devices of American nineteenth-century fiction. The actual details of the tale develop suggestive overtones which Ishmael, the most garrulous of narrators, is quick to point out. This can be seen in its simplest form in the way many of the characters are named. Ahab, the *Pequod's* captain, bears the same name as the vengeful and wicked King in the Old Testament, while the old sailor who warns the crew against Ahab is called Elijah. Ishmael himself is named, appropriately enough, after a Biblical outcast and pariah. Even the ships bear significant names. The *Pequod*, a doomed craft, has been christened after an extinct tribe of Massachusetts Indians. The *Rachel*, like the Rachel of the Old Testament, is sorrowing at the loss of a child.

One notes also that the details of the narrative are surrounded with ominous hints. Ishmael begins his journey at an inn run by a man called Peter Coffin and he ends floating on Queequeg's coffin. The crew mistake a giant white squid for Moby Dick – and squids are a sure sign of bad luck according to nautical superstition. The first man to stand lookout for the white whale falls from the mast-head to his death.

In fact, throughout the book Melville is in the habit of finding allegorical or symbolic meaning in the simplest and most concrete of facts. Ishmael, for example, is impressed by the ship's prow that Father Mapple uses as his pulpit, and immediately sees this as a deliberate allegory about the similarity between clergymen and ship's captains. In his eyes, the monkey-rope connecting the sailors during the stripping of the whale's blubber is not merely a practical safety mechanism; it is also an allegory of man's dependence on the goodwill of his fellows. The other characters share Ishmael's habit of mind and, when several of them find different meanings in the same object, a complex symbol begins to emerge. This is seen at its most obvious in the chapter entitled 'The Doubloon', where various members of

the crew examine in turn the coin that Ahab has nailed to the mast as a reward for sighting the white whale. Predictably enough, Ahab interprets the design on the coin as a reflection of his own glory, and Starbuck sees it as a gloomy religious warning. To Stubb the design is a whimsical picture of man's inevitable progress from the cradle to the grave, while the down-to-earth Flask immediately sees the coin in terms of its financial value and the number of cigars it would buy.

Moby Dick is treated in the same way as the doubloon; Melville is concerned to show that the white whale means different things to different people. The crew of the *Pequod* is a microcosm of American society itself – it contains representatives of most social and ethnic groups – and out of their various reactions to the chase Melville constructs a complicated statement about the American view of nature. Starbuck is an earnest Nantucket Quaker and in his eyes whaling is simply a business; he is interested in earning a living, not in pursuing romantic quests. Inevitably, he disapproves of Ahab's policy, and at one point even debates mutiny against the Captain. If nature exists for Starbuck merely to be exploited, it exists for Ishmael to be enjoyed as a refuge. He becomes a whaler to get away from society. At the beginning of the book he talks about his growing depression and his discontent with life on land; at least to begin with, his motives for joining the cruise are purely escapist.

To Ahab the pursuit of the white whale is all-important. Moby Dick has wounded him (Melville discreetly hints that Ahab did not merely lose his leg, but was also castrated), and his determination to get his revenge becomes an obsession. The whale, he insists, struck him out of malice, not blind instinct; indeed, it represents all the evil in the natural universe. Ahab's quest is an attempt to penetrate to the heart of nature's mystery – to confront God himself if necessary, but certainly to go beyond the normal limits of human knowledge. The practical and God-fearing Starbuck can see only lunacy and blasphemy in such an endeavour. But, as Melville insists, it also shows that magnificent and

fatal pride which one sees in the heroes of Greek and Renaissance tragedy. Captain Ahab is a latter-day Faust or King Lear.

Although Melville is impressed by Ahab's defiance of the universe, he ultimately disapproves of it, as the description of Ishmael's reactions is designed to make clear. To begin with, Ishmael is converted by Ahab's inflammatory rhetoric; he cheers his Captain enthusiastically with the rest of the crew. But as the voyage progresses, he becomes more and more detached. While Ahab conducts his frenetic pursuit of Moby Dick, Ishmael settles for a different sort of quest. He undertakes long scholarly inquiries about whales and whaling lore, and particularly about Moby Dick itself. The narrator becomes a parody of the pedantic scholar, endlessly piling up evidence; one such chapter is entitled, 'Of Whales in Paint; in Teeth; in Wood; in Sheet-Iron; in Stone; in Mountains; in Stars'. Ishmael does not see the humour of this, but Melville certainly does. Yet at the same time, Ishmael's quest is at once more intelligent and safer than Ahab's. Appropriately enough, Ishmael is the only survivor of the final confrontation with Moby Dick.

It is still, however, the tragedy of Ahab that dominates the book and gives it its peculiar grandeur. Beginning with a personal experience of whaling and a simple enough story of adventure at sea, Melville constructed a novel that is as complicated in its technique as it is daring in its speculation. For *Moby Dick* is part drama, part adventure story, part philosophical inquiry, part scientific study and part epic poem. It is a leviathan of a book.

Billy Budd

SUMMARY During the Napoleonic Wars a young sailor named Billy (or Baby) Budd is pressed from the crew of the merchant ship *The Rights-of-Man* into the service of HMS *Indomitable*. As he explains to Lieutenant Ratcliffe, Captain Graveling is sorry to lose Billy since he had been a peacemaker in an otherwise inharmonious crew. Billy is an

extremely handsome young man, merry and artless in his manner. He is entirely innocent and unselfconscious; his only imperfection is a tendency to stutter when upset or angry. He quickly adjusts to his new position and becomes a favourite on the *Indomitable*.

Recent mutinies at Spithead and the Nore have roused fears of disaffection throughout the navy. Yet the *Indomitable* is apparently a happy ship. Its captain is Edward Vere, commonly known as Starry Vere. He is a brave sailor and firm disciplinarian, but his tendency to dreaminess and intellectuality makes him unpopular with his fellow-officers. The Master-at-Arms is John Claggart, a man in his mid-thirties who entered the navy only recently. He is more educated and genteel than his humble post would suggest. Nobody knows anything about his background or birth — there is even some doubt as to whether he is actually English.

Billy is punctilious in the performance of his duties, so he is surprised when he is reprimanded for carelessness with his kit. He consults the Dansker, an old veteran, who says that Claggart has a secret hatred of Billy. Billy does not believe this, but in fact Claggart does dislike the handsome young sailor. Squeak, the Master-at-Arms' underling, has been fomenting trouble and bringing back bad reports of Billy to feed Claggart's antagonism. One night the young sailor is approached by another member of the crew with the suggestion that he join a projected mutiny. Stuttering almost uncontrollably, Billy rejects the idea. He does not inform the officers but confides in the Dansker, who suggests that Claggart was in some way behind the incident.

Claggart seeks an interview with Vere and alleges that Billy is involved in a mutinous conspiracy. Vere, who has been favourably impressed by the little he has seen of Billy, receives the accusation with suspicion. Billy is summoned secretly to the Captain's cabin. Confronted with his accuser, he begins to stutter too violently to answer coherently. In frustration he lashes out at Claggart and kills him.

Vere summons a drumhead court of three officers, although he could have put Billy in irons and referred the

