

"The Immense Remote, the Wild, the Watery, the Unshored": Exploring the Ocean as Heterotopia in *Moby-Dick*

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One of the challenges in teaching a classic like *Moby-Dick* is that students think they already know the story. Immersed in an increasingly circus-like media environment, students are exposed to myriad misrepresentative interpretations of the novel. Like many of Shakespeare's popular works, Melville's masterpiece has been cut and compressed into clichés to be used in movies, television, and advertising to the extent that many viewers are lulled into thinking they have no need to read the source of such allusions. For example, on their YouTube channel, AT&T recently posted a commercial for a new mobile device, touting it as a "modern-day retelling of the literary classic 'Moby Dick' through the features and functionality of the BlackBerry® Torch™." The advertisement shows a mobile query for "Moby Dick" yielding a series of quasi-related matches: an iTunes link for a song by Moby, a cartoon character shouting, "Call me Ishmael," and a series of pictures and headlines about whales. "Why read the book," one might ask, "when I have such a neat, quick summary right here on my cell phone?" As teachers of American literature, we have our work cut out for us in persuading students of the importance of actually reading the awe-inspiring feat that is Melville's magnum opus.

Considering the difficulty of enticing students to read a story they think they already know, it behooves us to approach the novel from

different, unexpected points of view in order to expose its surprising freshness and complexity. Geocriticism, the literary theory focusing on the geographical space a writer creates and reveals through language, offers such a perspective. The space of the ocean in particular is often taken for granted in the traditional approaches to teaching *Moby-Dick*. At first glance, the seascape of the novel merely seems a convenient background for the more obvious themes, characters, and symbols. I propose, however, that a close reading of Melville's ocean is key to understanding his unique vision of the world.

In his 2004 book *The Outlaw Sea: A World of Freedom, Chaos, and Crime*, William Langewieshe describes the enduring liberty afforded to people who live and conduct business at sea. He writes, "At a time when every last patch of land is claimed by one government or another, and when citizenship is treated as an absolute condition of human existence, the ocean is a realm that remains radically free" (3). He goes on to explain how despite many governments' attempts to regulate and control international waters, the very nature of the ocean, its "easy disregard for human constructs, its size, the strength of its storms, and the privacy provided by its horizons" prevents them from effectively enforcing any law (Langewieshe 7). As his title indicates, the unrestricted freedom of the ocean also encompasses the results of such lawlessness, including piracy and terrorism. The allure of that all-encompassing liberty, however, proves to be an irresistible force drawing hundreds of thousands of people to a life at sea that differs very little now from the mid-nineteenth century. Melville recognized the ageless appeal of the ocean's boundlessness, making it a mainstay in his writing. In *Moby-Dick*, the sea is a space where people from all cultures can meet on an equal, if unstable footing. Melville's ocean functions as an ever-shifting stage on which men seek and find inspiration for both individual and collective freedom.

In my exploration of this idea, I will compare *Moby-Dick's* ocean to Foucault's concept of heterotopia. In his essay "Of Other Spaces," Foucault defines this new term, differentiating it from that of a utopia, or a "fundamentally unreal space" (24):

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (24)

Foucault further explains that heterotopias "have a function in relation to all the space that remains." Either the heterotopia, or "space of illusion," works to expose "every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory" or "to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled" (27). Idealist colonies, brothels, and gardens are all instances of such heterotopias, according to Foucault, but he concludes his essay with the following example:

[I]f we think, after all, that the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea [. . .] you will understand why the boat has not only been for our civilization from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development [. . .], but has been simultaneously the greatest

reserve of the imagination. The ship is the heterotopia *par excellence*. (27)

Cesare Casarino takes his "historical and conceptual cue" from this notion of the ship as heterotopia. He writes that "[t]he modernist sea narrative in effect has already advanced such a claim" to the "space of the ship as its central focus and telos." The modernist sea narrative, including *Moby-Dick*, Casarino argues, "questions not only its own foundation, but also reaches beyond itself to question the foundation of a world that for several centuries has been run in all sorts of ways by ships – in questioning itself, it questions the whole world" (13). Keeping Foucault's theory and Casarino's application in mind, I propose a widening of the focus of this notion of heterotopia in sea narratives to examine the vast space of the ocean as a prime example. Casarino makes an excellent case for Melville's whaling ship as heterotopia, but the more significant and enduring heterotopia is the sea. The ocean as heterotopia functions to simultaneously represent, contest, and invert "all the other real sites that can be found within the culture" (Foucault 24). In *Moby-Dick*, Melville draws attention to each of these coexisting functions of the sea.

The ocean is a space vast enough to represent the entire world. In his book *Melville, Mapping and Globalization*, Robert T. Tally Jr. explains, "For Melville, *truth* is always related to *space*, and consequently, the ascertaining of truth, and truth-telling or narrative, are imagined as geographic or cartographic enterprises" (98). In order to express his vision of truth, Melville explores the real and imaginary geography of the sea. He points to the ocean's potential for encompassing the infinite possibilities of life in "Hawthorne and His Mosses" when he writes, "You must have plenty of sea-room to tell the Truth in" (246). The specificity of "sea-room" indicates that not just any large space will suffice – the ocean has qualities that make it unique when compared to other elements. In "The Monkey-Rope" Melville offers this concise yet all-inclusive metaphor:

"That unsounded ocean you gasp in, is Life" (*Moby-Dick* 351). Its size, therefore, is one of the characteristics of the ocean that makes it so appealing as a heterotopia in real life and fiction. Charles Olson supports the idea of the necessity for employing this physically and symbolically large space. He claims, "To MAGNIFY is the mark of *Moby-Dick*," evinced in part by "the scope and space of the sea" (71). He compares the novel to the play of Shakespeare's that "Melville penciled most heavily," *Antony and Cleopatra* (71): "It is built as Pyramids were built. There is space here, and objects big enough to contest space. These are men and women who live life large. The problems are the same but they work themselves out on a stage as wide as ocean" (72). Extending this reasoning, *Moby-Dick* is as immense and fluid as *Antony and Cleopatra* is imposing and solid. Melville uses the entire watery world as his stage to contrast the literary monoliths of Shakespeare and other precursors.

On this grand oceanic stage, Melville's drama unfolds, revealing layer after layer of conflict. This conflict takes the form of what at first glance seems to be an inherent duality in all aspects of the world. The ocean as heterotopia, like the stage in a theater, is the space "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault 25). One prominent example of this elemental conflict is that of the juxtaposed sites of land and sea and how man relates to each. The land is a stable yet inherently restrictive place, while the ocean is ultimate free space – ungovernable to the point of anarchy, representing, as we have seen in previous chapters, "the universal cannibalism" (*Moby-Dick* 299) of all nature, including man.

Throughout the course of the novel, the reader follows Ishmael's learning curve, realizing along with him the truth revealed through his experience, reflection, and narration. Foucault's second principle of heterotopias is that they can change over time according to a society's evolving needs and attitudes (25). The heterotopia of the ocean in *Moby-*

Dick changes from one that merely reflects and extends the land to one that challenges and even threatens it. Although his intuition in "Loomings" tells Ishmael that there is something inherently different about the ocean before he sets out on his voyage, he still holds to the idea that the sea is yet another territory to be conquered: "Let America add Mexico to Texas, and pile Cuba upon Canada; let the English overswarm all India, and hang out their blazing banner from the sun; two thirds of this terraqueous globe are the Nantucketer's. For the sea is his; he owns it, as Emperors own empires" (*Moby-Dick* 70). However, as the novel progresses and Ishmael gains more and more insight at sea, he learns that his initial perception could not be further from the truth. Matteson argues that "the humbling outcome of the voyage argues the absurdity of subjecting the ocean to colonial claims" (172). As Ishmael observes at the end of "Brit," the ocean alone is "masterless" in that "no power but its own controls it" (299). At the end of the novel, it alone remains unperturbed by all of man's efforts to subdue it and its creatures: "the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago" (*Moby-Dick* 624). Deleuze and Guattari explain that the sea remains the "principal among smooth spaces" despite all human attempts to divide and conquer it:

But the sea is also, of all smooth spaces, the first one attempts were made to striate, to transform into a dependency of the land, with its fixed routes, constant directions, relative movements, a whole counterhydraulic of channels and conduits [. . .] But this undertaking had the most unexpected result: the multiplication of relative movements, the intensification of relative speeds in striated space, ended up reconstituting a smooth space or absolute movement [. . .] instead of striating space, one occupies it with a vector of deterritorialization in perpetual motion. (387)

In light of this explanation, we see how the ocean works as a heterotopia that manages to change yet stay the same over time. The sea both reacts to and absorbs all actions exacted upon it, transforming human effort while subduing it into a reinforcement of the ocean's sovereignty. Given this natural model of absolute freedom, it hardly seems a surprise that both Melville and Ishmael recognize the potential for imaginative storytelling, "as the sea surpasses the land in this matter" (*Moby-Dick* 195).

From the beginning of the novel, Melville sets out to emphasize the preeminence of the space of the sea. The *Pequod*, while it in itself offers a rich space for contemplation, is a means to an end. The ship functions as a vessel in which to search for the whale in his native environment, "the wild and distant seas where he rolls his island bulk" (*Moby-Dick* 8). In "Loomings," Ishmael lays the foundation for one of the most important mysteries of the novel: universal attraction to the sea. It is the water itself, not the many ships anchored at the harbor, that so fascinates the "thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries" (4). Ishmael observes these men all "striving to get a still better seaward peep," getting "just as nigh the water as they possibly can without falling in" (4). These men are in dire need of this sea communion, for they are "all landsmen; of week days pent up in lath and plaster – tied to counters, nailed to benches, cinched to desks" (4). Contemplation of the "green fields" simply will not suffice for these men, the implication being that they must see themselves as a part of something to which they cannot be tied, nailed, or cinched, and thus enslaved. They crave to be reminded of their own free nature through contemplation of this heterotopia, this real space that seems to be "a kind of effectively enacted utopia" (Foucault 24). Here and throughout the text, Melville underscores the inherent condition of man as slave as he compares life on land to life at sea. In "The Lee Shore" the land, though the reader might traditionally associate it with "safety, comfort, hearthstone, supper, warm blankets, friends, all that's

kind to our mortalities," in fact poses "direst jeopardy" to the *Pequod* since "one touch of land" would destroy it (116). While the stormy sea also poses danger, its flexible liquidity allows the freedom of movement the ship needs to remain intact. In this light, the ocean offers both chaos and liberty, infinitely preferable to the "treacherous, slavish shore" (117).

The problem with exploring this enormous free space of the ocean is that in one way or another, a person must surrender his freedom in order to gain it. Ishmael is aware of this conundrum, yet willingly gives himself over to the lowly job of "a simple sailor" (*Moby-Dick* 6) in hopes of compensation by way of an actual paycheck (a small percentage of the profits) and, as he explains to Captain Peleg, a chance to "see what whaling is" and "to see the world" (79). Ishmael, who has been "lording it as a country schoolmaster," gives up his authority to become a common sailor, willing to "sweep down the decks" at the order of "some old hunks of a sea-captain." He sees it as no great indignity, though, since all men are inherently beholden to something or someone else. "Who aint a slave? Tell me that?" he challenges (6). As a simple sailor instead of an officer, he also gets the privilege of the "wholesome exercise and pure air of the forecastle deck" (7). His position as a common deck hand ensures him closer proximity to the sea than even the captain, paradoxically bringing him closer to the freedom it seems to promise.

Melville's portrayal of the sailors' lives aboard the *Pequod* is in many ways representative of real whaling ships' crews in the mid-nineteenth century. Casarino writes that the whaling industry employed "the most international, multiethnic, multilingual, and especially multiracial labor force of any other sea practice" (5). The heterogeneous nature of such a group of sailors becomes most pronounced in "Midnight, Forecastle." The way that the sailors are united by the oceanic space that surrounds them points to the ocean's power as heterotopia. Melville structures this chapter like a play, writing each character's name in all

caps preceding his lines and stage directions. The secondary characters are identified by their respective place of origin, rendering names such as "AZORES SAILOR" or "CHINA SAILOR" (189), bringing attention to the diversity of the crew. Earlier, while introducing the "Knights and Squires" of the tale, Ishmael calls on the "just Spirit of Equality, which has spread one royal mantle of humanity over all [his] kind" to bear him out in his depiction of the "meanest mariners, and renegades, and castaways" as true nobility (126-7). Lawrence Buell calls this passage a "studiously bombastical [. . .] playful extravagance, a mask for the occasion" (229), but he still credits F. O. Matthiessen's appraisal of Melville's language here as a prime example of the "democratization of Shakespearean rhetoric," a "full-voiced affirmation of democratic dignity" (444-5). This seemingly ideal microcosm of diverse society seems a wondrous improvement from life in the antebellum United States, but Ishmael soon discovers that the interdependence of this social arrangement keeps each man indentured to his superiors and the ship as a whole. Not even the ship's officers are comfortable or happy with their supposedly privileged positions, as we learn from the awkward and unsatisfying dinner scene in "The Cabin-Table." Flask, the third mate, is in the unfortunate position of being the last to the table and the first to leave. If any lower ranking sailor envied Flask's "official capacity, all that sailor had to do, in order to obtain ample vengeance, was to go aft at dinner-time and get a peep at Flask through the cabin sky-light, sitting silly and dumfounded before awful Ahab" (164). Not even Ahab, however, is free to do whatever he wants. He knows he must have the support of his crew if he is to even approach his goal of catching the White Whale. When Starbuck questions his judgment in "The Quarter-Deck," Ahab recognizes the necessity for his subtlest rhetorical skills, "a little lower layer," in order to persuade the first mate of the priority of his vengeful quest (178). Considering all these examples, the reader finds that while the whalemens are surrounded by

and constantly reminded of the possibility of absolute freedom in the heterotopia of the ocean, all of them are enslaved by their dependence on the ship and each other.

Life at sea proves to be replete with such contradictions. In her article "The Paradox of Slave Mutiny in Herman Melville, Charles Johnson, and Frederick Douglass," Helen Lock writes, "The sea has long been figured as a symbol of freedom, limitlessness, the absence of differentiation" (55). The strict hierarchical structure of the whaling ship was quite the opposite to the flexibility and latitude of the ocean. Therefore, "not only were these sailors in a paradoxical situation with regard to the element they traversed, but there is also an element of paradox in the concept of their engaging in mutiny, given the inversion of mutually recognized natural hierarchy, based on class and capital" (55). In fact, these two situations are related. Their exposure to the limitless, chaotic ocean becomes an inspiration for the sailors to commit acts of mutiny against the strict hierarchy of the whaling ship. Foucault writes that a heterotopia is a space that functions to invert the status quo (27), which is precisely how the sea functions in this scenario. Individuals packed together in the relatively small space of a ship are forced to conform to the whims of the captain and his officers, who have essentially become their masters. When a disagreement arises, as it usually does among a crew as culturally diverse crew as the *Pequod's*, it comes as no surprise that the lower-ranking party may attempt to overthrow what it sees as unjust power.

The fact that they are floating in the middle of the ocean is key to those who would incite mutiny. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison observes that "[t]he concept of freedom did not emerge in a vacuum. Nothing highlighted freedom – if it did not in fact create it – like slavery" (38). If one applies this idea to the situation of the sailors who find themselves treated as slaves, the masterless ocean that surrounds them

becomes an almost irresistible model for their own behavior. "The *Town-Ho's* Story" provides evidence of the influence of the ocean's freedom on man's choices. Ishmael's description of the principal mutineer, Steelkilt, focuses on the culture of the Great Lakes that made him the strong, free-spirited man he proves to be. "Though an inlander," Ishmael tells, "Steelkilt was wild-ocean born, and wild-ocean nurtured; as much of an audacious mariner as any." As long as he was treated with "that common decency of human recognition which is the meanest slave's right [. . .] Steelkilt had long been retained harmless and docile" (*Moby-Dick* 268). Radney, the jealous mate, makes the grave mistake of dishonoring that "common human decency" in his dealings with Steelkilt and reaps the inevitable consequences of trying to enslave a nature so strongly influenced by the sovereignty of the sea. Steelkilt plans to kill Radney for his unjust abuses, but the sea offers up a better solution, namely, *Moby Dick* (281). In a fortuitous turn of events for Steelkilt, Radney literally throws himself into the jaws of death in his attempt to conquer the White Whale. Further emboldened by the apparent favor of the sea gods, Steelkilt, leading the majority of the crew, deserts the *Town-Ho* and embarks on his own series of independent voyages, indefinitely eluding the law and any consequences that may have befallen him on land. "Where Steelkilt now is, gentlemen, none know," Ishmael reports (283). His alliance with the independent oceanic spirit, evinced by his insistence on fairness and dignity in the face of unworthy oppression, makes Steelkilt a rebel hero and a legend of the whale fishery.

Of course, not all men have the courage to follow their instincts to become as independent as the sea, especially since it means surrendering the kind of life they have come to know on land. In "The Castaway," Ishmael muses on why such independence is so appalling to the majority of men: "Mark, how when sailors in a dead calm bathe in the open sea — mark how closely they hug their ship and only coast along her

sides" (453). It is not that the men are afraid of drowning, since "to swim in the open ocean is as easy to the practiced swimmer as to ride in a spring-carriage ashore." The main fear that men feel at the prospect of the open sea is the converse of independence: "the awful lonesomeness is intolerable" (453). Pip, however, proves to be an exception to this rule. The others call him a coward for not staying in the whaling boat, but not even he realizes the uncommon courage he shows by choosing to jump out of the boat on two occasions, entrusting himself to the sea and the "hands of God" (452). The sea claims him for its own, transforming him into a prophet of its coming doom for the *Pequod*, a collective of men who follow their captain's wild intent to overthrow its power. Despite Pip's cryptic warnings, Ahab continues to exercise his increasing hubris. He repeatedly boasts that he is "immortal on land and on sea!" (542). He paradoxically remains a slave to his own inflexible quest, and in doing so, dooms the ship and its entire crew to the ocean's chastisement. As Tally explains, "At sea, nature cannot be conquered or tamed, but must be treated with the utmost respect if man is to survive the encounter" (72). Instead of treating the ocean with due respect, Ahab relies on his own inflated sense of knowledge and power. Despite all of his years at sea, his attitude towards nature remains that of a colonizing land-lubber in that he thinks he can easily chart, divide, and overthrow this space along with its most powerful inhabitants. He is, of course, completely mistaken.

Full integration into the wild space of the sea calls for an acceptance of one's inevitable death. Heterotopias "presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable," Foucault explains. "Either the entry is compulsory [. . .] or the individual has to submit to rites and purifications" (26). Bulkington is the first and most extreme example of such an absolute submission to the heterotopia of the sea. He renounces the comfortable oppression of life on land for a chance to enter into what he trusts is the ultimate space of truth,

"the open independence of [the] sea" (117). Bulkington's giving up of the ship, of its intermediate position between land and sea, means immediate death, but as Ishmael later muses, "Death is only a launching into the region of the strange Untried; it is the first salutation to the possibilities of the immense Remote, the Wild, the Watery, the Unshored" (529). Ishmael himself tells us at the beginning of "Loomings" that his venture out to sea is his "substitute for pistol and ball" (3). In the chapter "The Blacksmith," he tells the story of a man who, having made a ruin of his life, literally has nothing left to lose; so like Ishmael, he signs on to the whaling voyage as an alternative to killing himself:

[T]herefore, to the death-longing eyes of such men, who still have left in them some interior compunctions against suicide, does the all-contributed and all-receptive ocean alluringly spread forth his whole plain of unimaginable, taking terrors, and wonderful, new-life adventures; and from the hearts of infinite Pacifics, the thousand mermaids sing to them — "Come hither, broken-hearted; here is another life without the guilt of intermediate death; here are wonders supernatural without dying for them" (529)

This conflation and juxtaposition of two incompatible states of being, life and death, in the space of the sea, is yet another way that qualifies it as a heterotopia.

The fourth principle of Foucault's heterotopia applies to Melville's ocean – one that, while it may be perceived as morbid, is one that leaves us with a fitting sense of finality. Foucault explains that

Heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time – which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies. The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time. This situation shows us that

the cemetery is indeed a highly heterotopic place since, for the individual, the cemetery begins with this strange heterochrony, the loss of life, and with this quasi-eternity in which her permanent lot is dissolution and disappearance.
(26)

Moby-Dick is replete with comparisons of the sea to the grave, and consequently, the space and time of eternity. Beginning in "The Chapel," Ishmael ponders the seemingly preferable burial on land as opposed to one at sea, yet ends up concluding that he is happy at the prospect of "a speechlessly quick chaotic bundling of a man into Eternity" should he die in a whaling accident (41-2). In "The Town-Ho's Story" he describes the sea as "the grave already ready dug to the seaman's hand" as Steelkilt plots Radney's murder (280). When Queequeg dives into the ocean to rescue Tashtego, who has fallen head first into the whale's head, the crew sees him finally surface, "an arm thrust upright from the blue waves; a sight strange to see, as an arm thrust forth from the grass over a grave" (375). Later, when Queequeg thinks he is going to die of a fever, he requests a sort of coffin-canoe be built for his burial at sea. His people "believe that the stars are isles, but that far beyond all visible horizons, their own mild, uncontinented seas, interflow with the blue heavens; and so form the white breakers of the milky way" (521). Here, Queequeg's notion of death is that he will travel over the sea forever, extending into limitless space. Just a few pages later in the novel, the mermaids who beckon Perth the blacksmith to sea urge him, "bury thyself in a life which, to your now equally abhorred and abhorring, landed world, is more oblivious than death" (529). The sea as a kind of universal, eternal cemetery is a space that at once fulfills and transcends Foucault's idea of heterotopia.

Several other similar comparisons between the grave and the sea occur towards the final chapters of the novel, especially as Ahab

contemplates his own foretold death, but the images in the final chapter (not including the epilogue) are among the most memorable and significant: "Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago" (*Moby-Dick* 624). These sights and sounds remind us of a funeral: the screaming birds overlooking the place where the ship has disappeared; the "sullen" or mournful waves closing in over it; and the word "shroud," which incorporates so many meanings here, but one most prevalent in this reading: the death shroud, the clothes or the covering of the grave. Perhaps it is the perpetual motion and enduring age of the sea that lingers in our imagination most of all. The abiding cycle of rolling waves, that never-ending, circular motion, reminds us of the hope for an eternity unknown to us in this life – it is a space that people across time and culture have kept alive through the act of storytelling.

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Herman Melville's 'Moby-Dick' is undoubtedly a masterpiece that causes the reader to ponder in awe the sublime meaning of life whilst not providing finite elucidation, since "wonderfullest things are ever the unmentionable" (Melville 2003). Discover the world's research. 17+ million members. Dangerous and poisonous animals or vast scenery, most strikingly the ocean. Burke conjectures that the ocean is so terrifying due to its vastness. As an empiricist, Burke maintains that knowledge of the world around us is derived from our senses (that which we see, touch, taste, smell and hear). (Shaw 2006, p.49). As the title of his treatise shows, he is interested in the origin of our ideas of the sublime. Given Burke's empiricist philosophy, he. Read Chapter 1 - Loomings of Moby-Dick; or, The Whale by Herman Melville. The text begins: Call me Ishmael. Some years ago- never mind how long precisely- having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen and regulating the circulation. They must get just as nigh the water as they possibly can without falling And there they stand- miles of them- leagues. Inlanders all, they come from lanes and alleys, streets avenues- north, east, south, and west. Yet here they all unite. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all. In 1820 a massive sperm whale rammed a Nantucket whaling ship, sending it to the bottom of the Pacific Ocean. Stranded 1,500 miles from land, the surviving crew's horrific quest for survival came to symbolize the primordial struggle between man and nature. 6 Minute Read. By Xabier Armendariz. This story appears in the November/December 2016 issue of National Geographic History magazine. Herman Melville drew on his experiences as a whaler for his 1851 novel Moby-Dick; or, The Whale, the story of Captain Ahab and the whaleship Pequod, doomed by a quest for revenge on the white whale Moby Dick. The Essex's grisly fate inspired Melville, who knew the ship's first mate personally and used his writings as research. Moby-Dick is freely living in nature who never takes the initiative to get close to humans, and never take the initiative to attack humans, but the evil sides of sailors' humanity are doing everything possible to conquer and destroy it, so finally destroy themselves. In addition, Moby-Dick also is on behalf of the mystery of the universe. For humans, the universe is like a secret white, apart from a piece of white, they do not see anything. This is also one of the author's pessimism: in front of the powerful nature humans' nature are powerless and tiny.