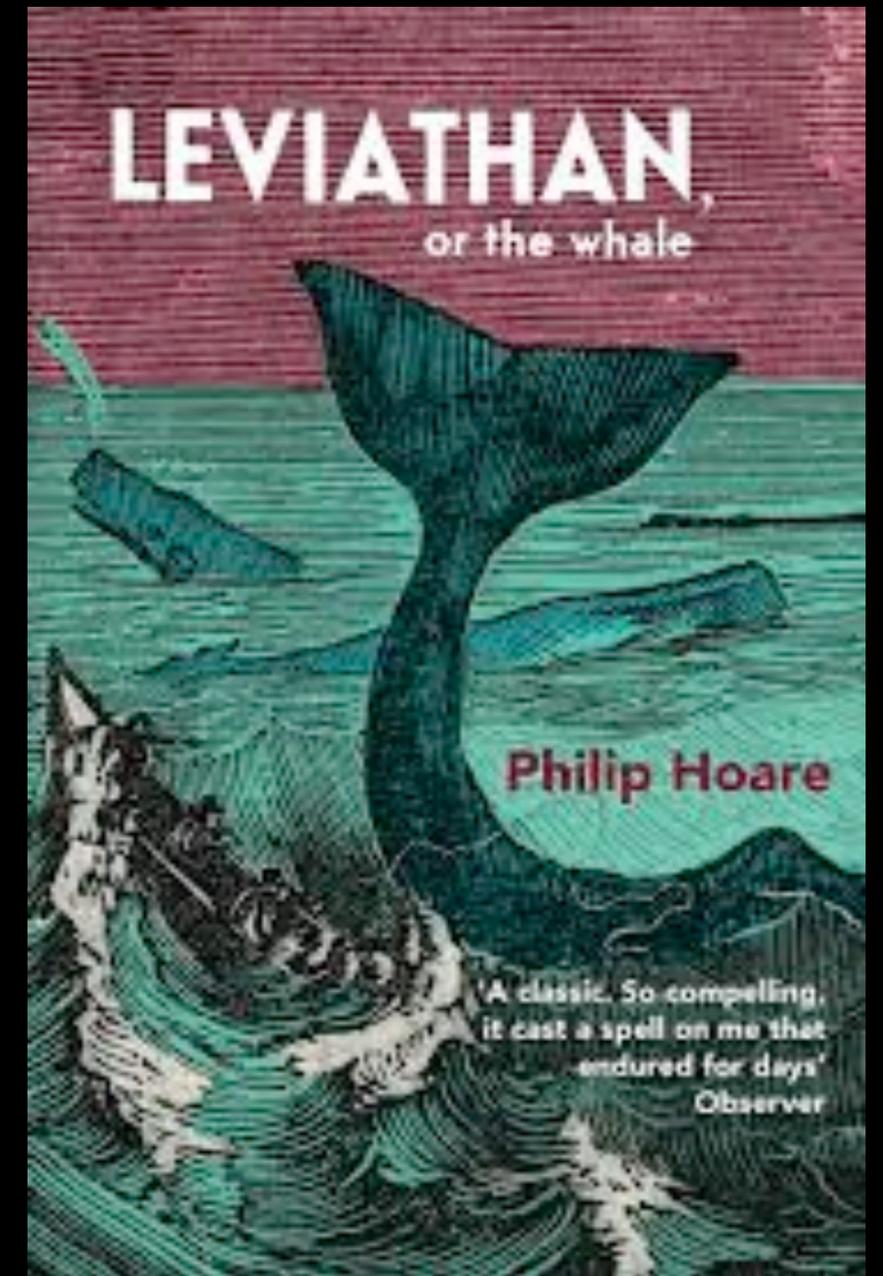


Moby-Dick

ECL 522: American Lit 1800-1860
Professor Jessica Pressman
Fall 2025



Day 4: Historical Context— The Essex

ADMIN

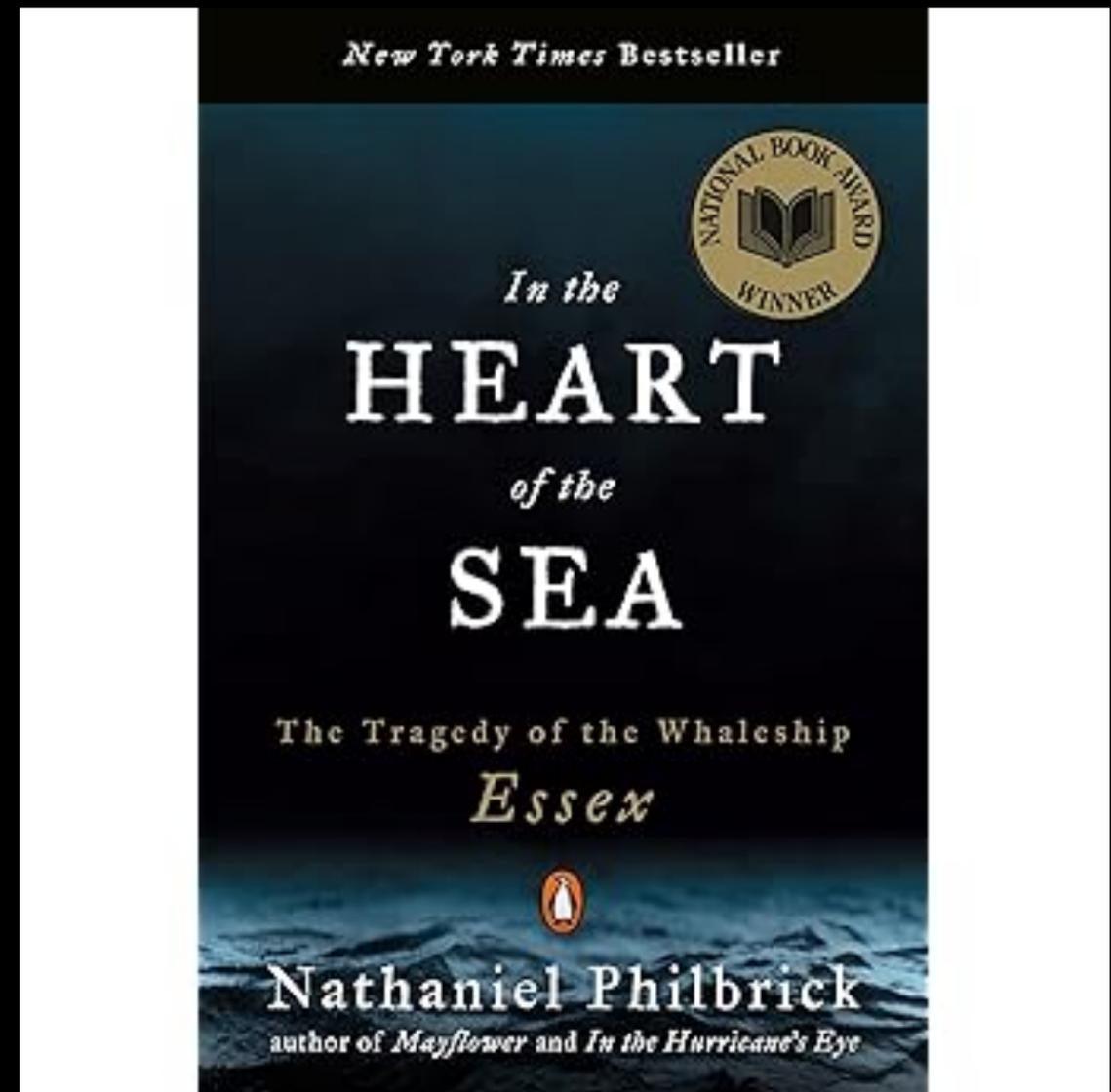
- CANVAS assignment— due tomorrow
- Wordpress password, adding this weekend
- blog due Sunday at midnight

Quick Discussion: the reading

- What did you think?
- What do you want to know &/or discuss today?

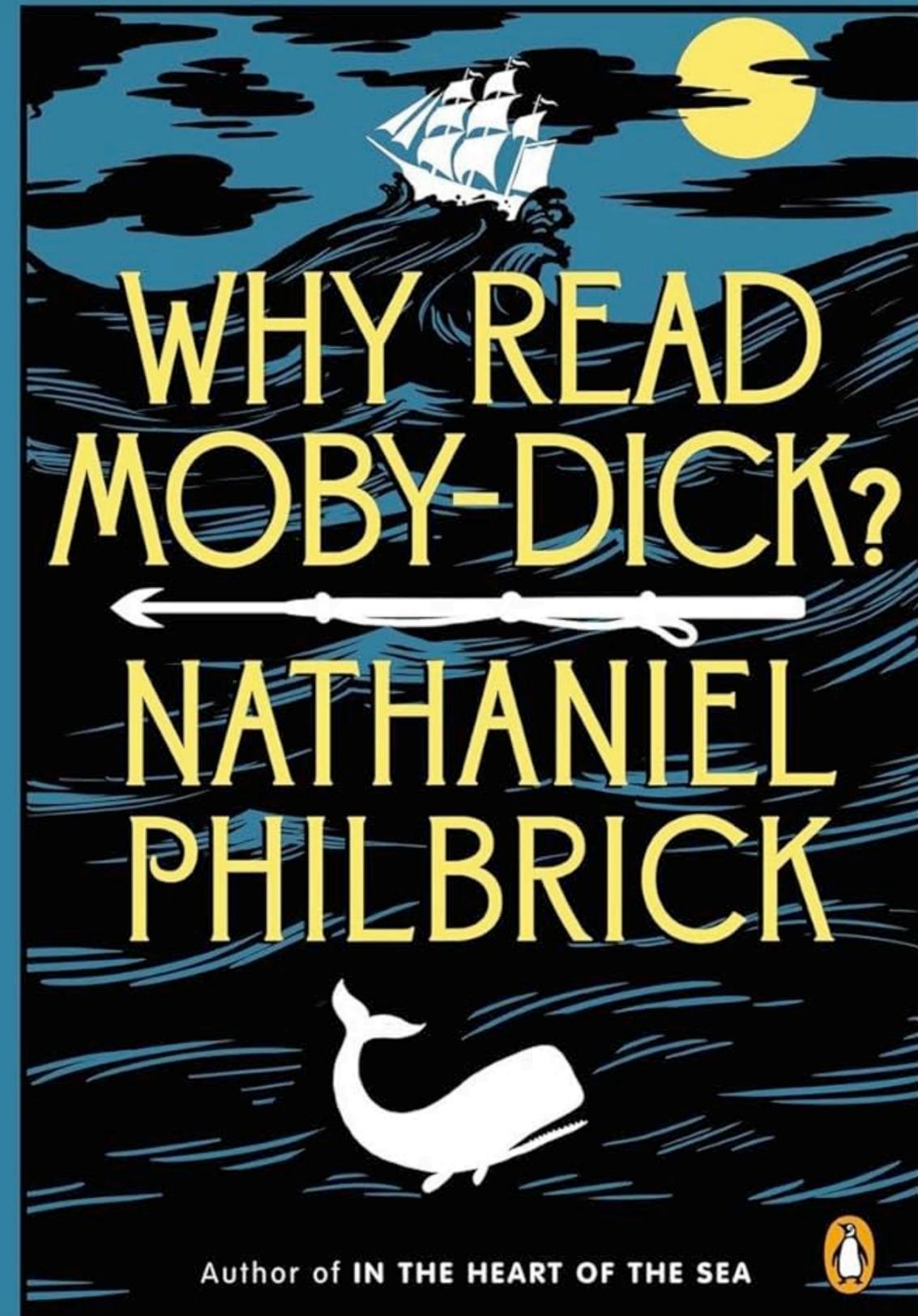
A real Historical Event

- See Nathaniel Philbrick, *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex* (Penguin Books, 2000) *National Book Award
- <https://www.nathanielphilbrick.com/in-the-heart-of-the-sea>



“To be an American writer in 1850 as to be part of a young, still tentative literary tradition” (4)

-Nathaniel Philbrick, *Why Read Moby-Dick?* Viking, 2011



From your blogs

- MYLO: The events of cannibalism are what disturbed me the most, not because of how disgusting it is, but because of the thought of what a human being could do when they have reached the lowest point in their life...This article is actually a stepping stone for the book because it feels like I am getting a little bit familiar with the materials, and I really do hope I find a lot of hidden meanings while reading *Moby Dick*. And at the same time, I do hope the book contains dark elements that I mentioned above.
- RAYNE: while King referred to a particular figure within the literature as a “thing,” I could not help but produce multiple instances to which said “thing” could be applied. The “thing” could be the whale, the ship, the sea, or man themselves, but considering a darker, more metaphysical approach, I would like to consider that he is talking about human nature.

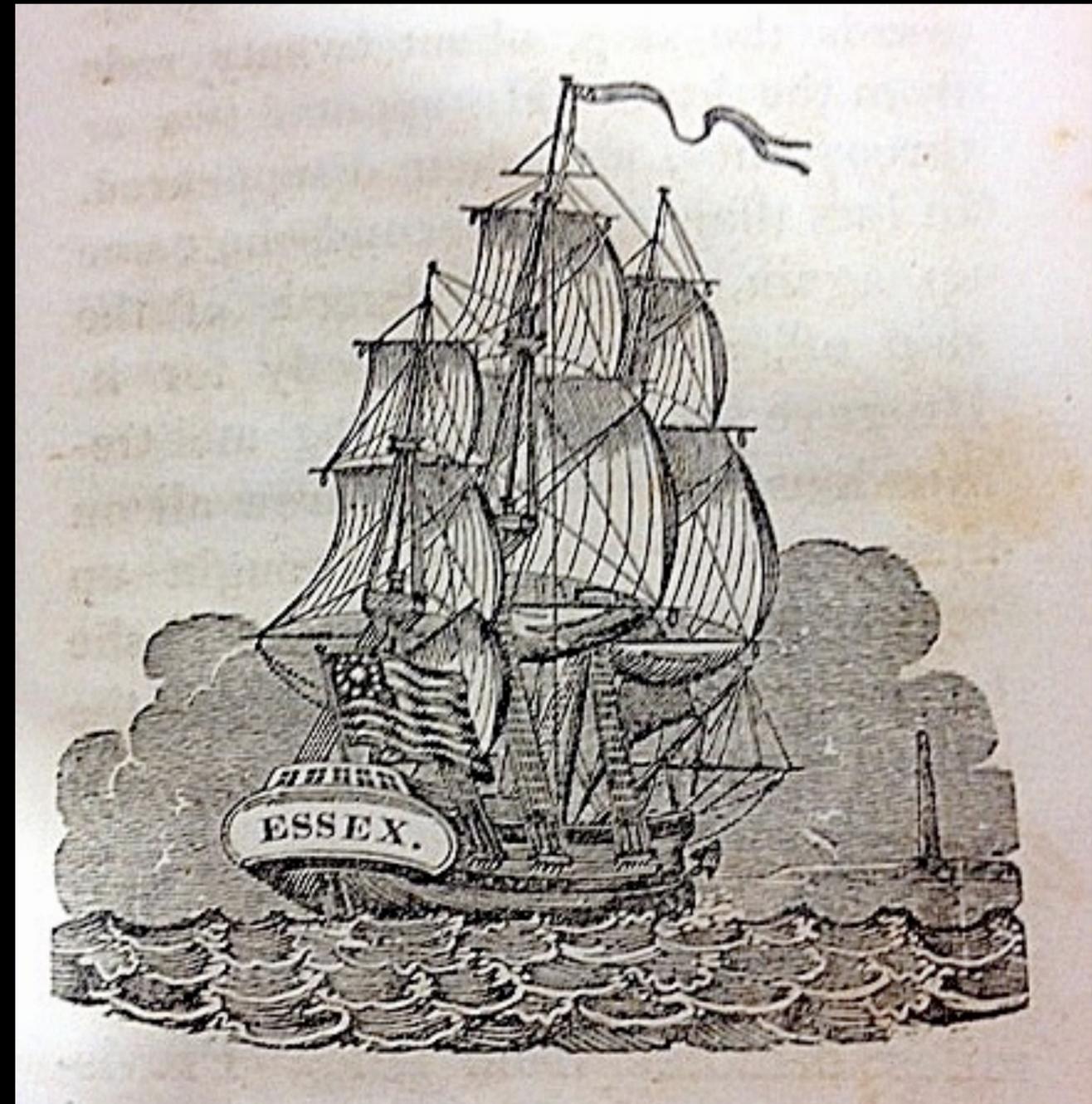
Ron Howard's 2015 movie
"In the Heart of the Sea" (starring Thor)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xs-JfPjgiA4>

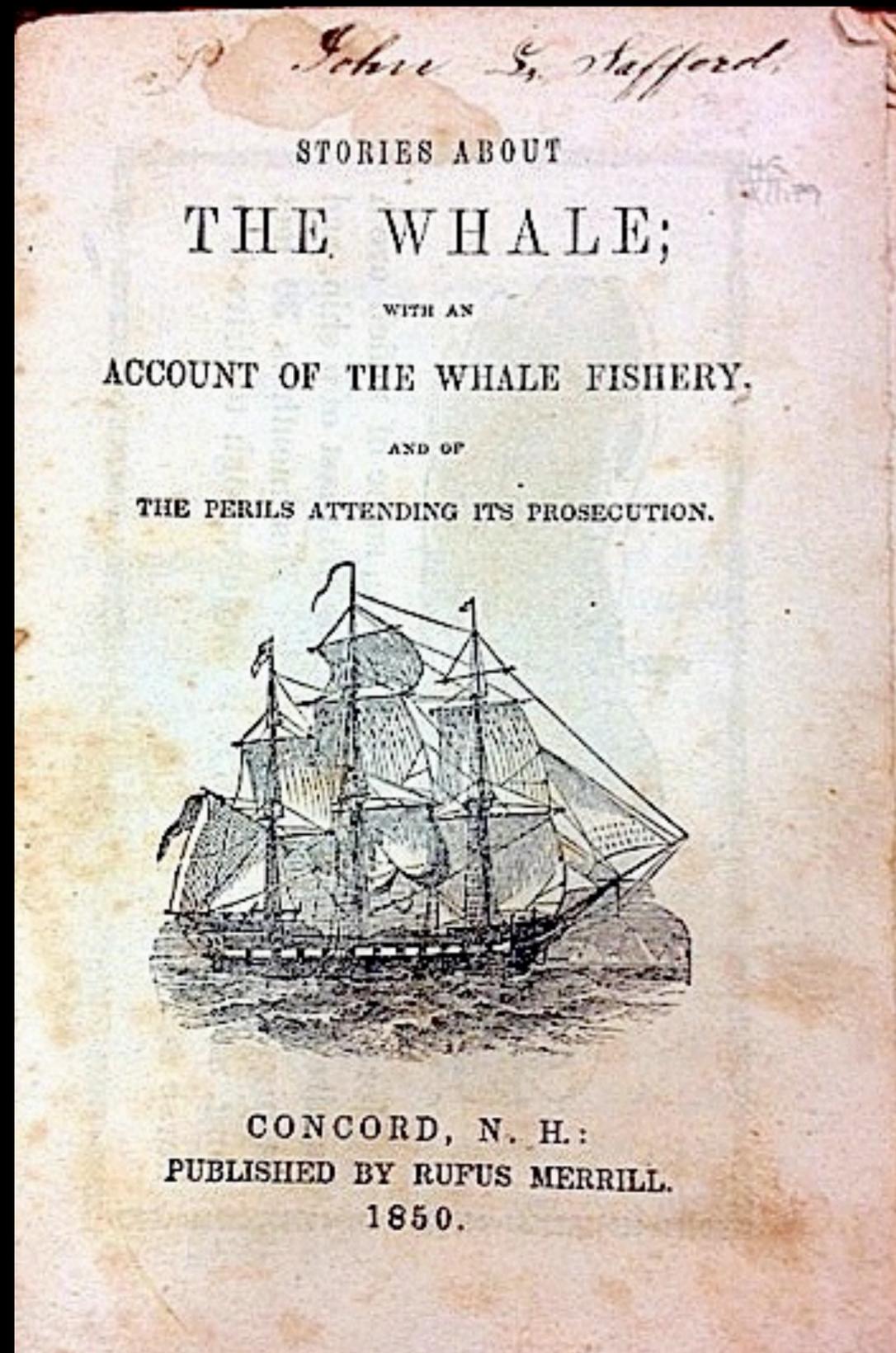
TRAILER

Owen Chase's narrative 1821

Owen Chase was the first mate on the *Essex* and lived to pen *Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-ship Essex of Nantucket* in 1821.

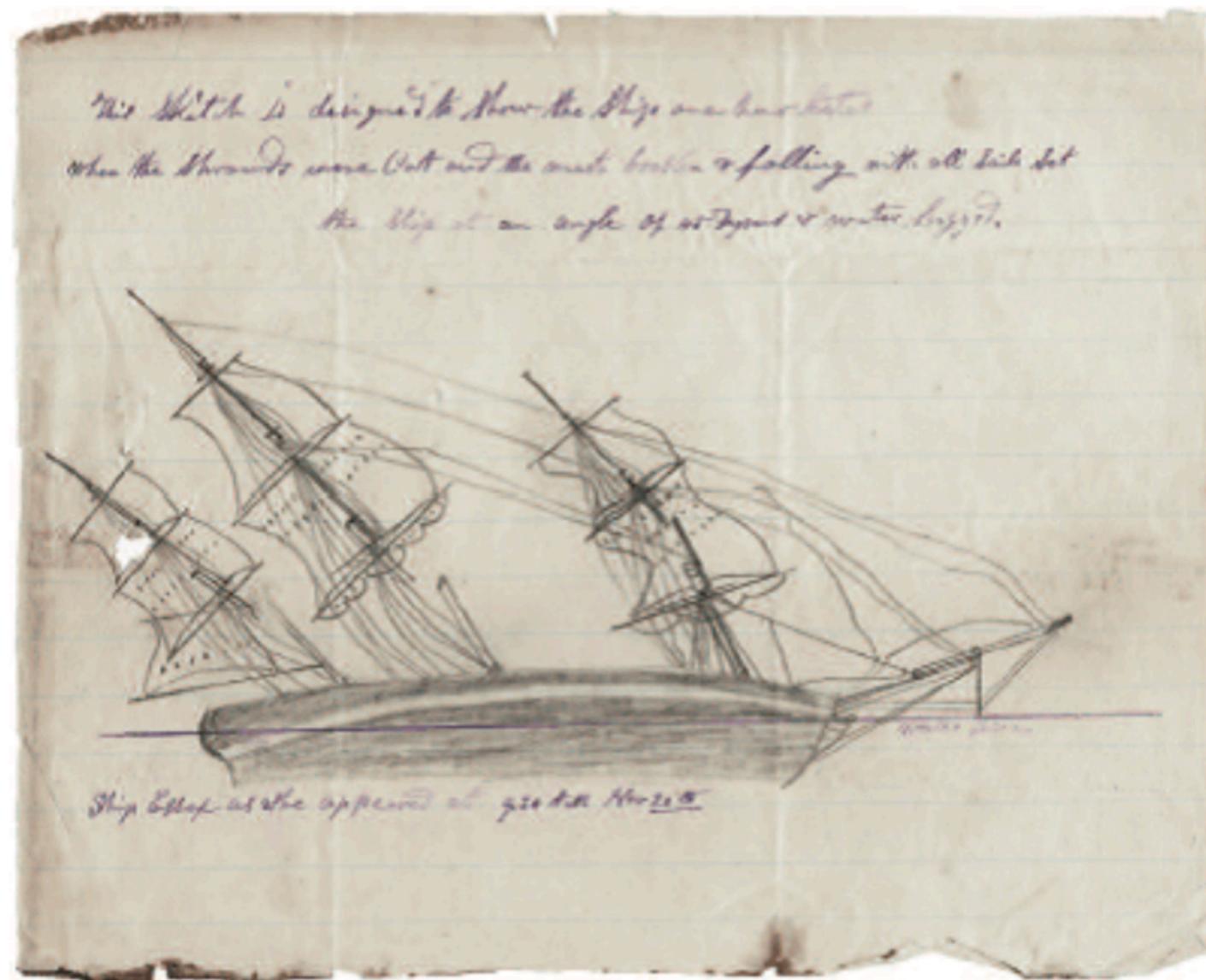


this “most remarkable” tale of the *Essex*, the ill-fated voyage that began in Nantucket in 1819. *Stories About the Whale: with an Account of the Whale Fishery, and the Perils Attending its Prosecution*, was published in Concord, New Hampshire in 1850





An illustration of Moby Dick attacking a whaling ship. Augustus Burnham Shute from the Moby-Dick edition published by C. H. Simonds Co



Thomas Nickerson's sketch of the Essex
MS106K4.

NARRATIVES OF THE WRECK OF THE WHALE-SHIP ESSEX

OF NANTUCKET WHICH WAS DESTROYED BY A WHALE IN THE PACIFIC OCEAN IN THE YEAR 1819 TOLD BY OWEN CHASE FIRST MATE THOMAS CHAPPEL SECOND MATE AND GEORGE POLLARD CAPTAIN OF THE SAID VESSEL TOGETHER WITH AN INTRODUCTION & TWELVE ENGRAVINGS ON WOOD BY ROBERT GIBBINGS



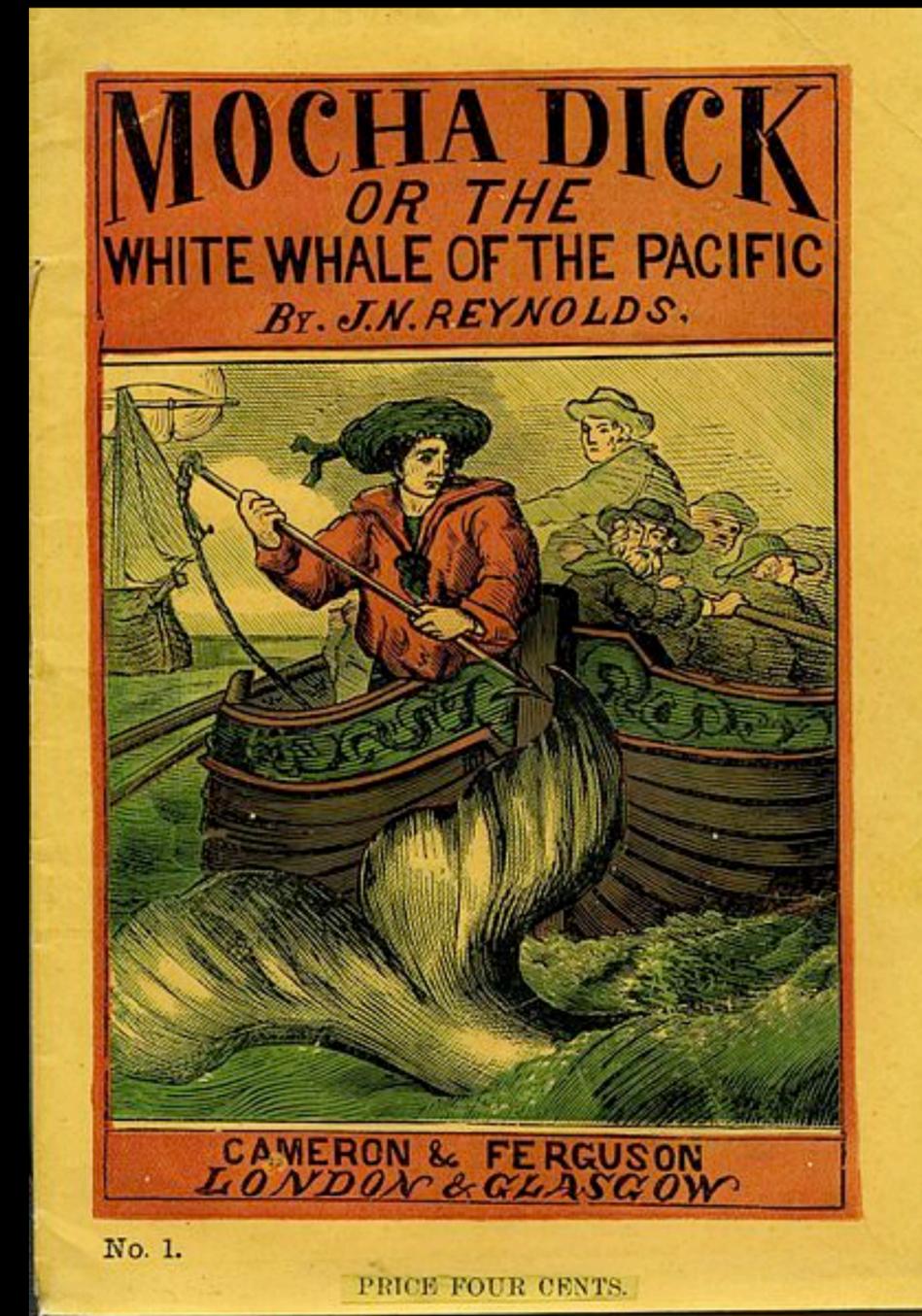
PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY THE
GOLDEN COCKEREL PRESS LONDON
1935

Mocha Dick

- a real whale in waters near Mocha Island, off the central coast of Chile
- first spotted in 1810
- enormous, **albino** sperm whale. 70 feet long
- killed in 1838

“this renowned monster, who had come off victorious in a hundred fights with his pursuers, [as] an old bull whale, of prodigious size and strength. From the effect of age, or more probably from a freak of nature, ... he was white as wool! ... Numerous boats are known to have been shattered by his immense flukes, or ground to pieces in the crush of his powerful jaws.”

—Jeremiah N. Reynolds in the popular *Knickerbocker Magazine* (May of 1839,)



Whale oil

Spermaceti—after pressing, it clarified like butter and made pure white wax

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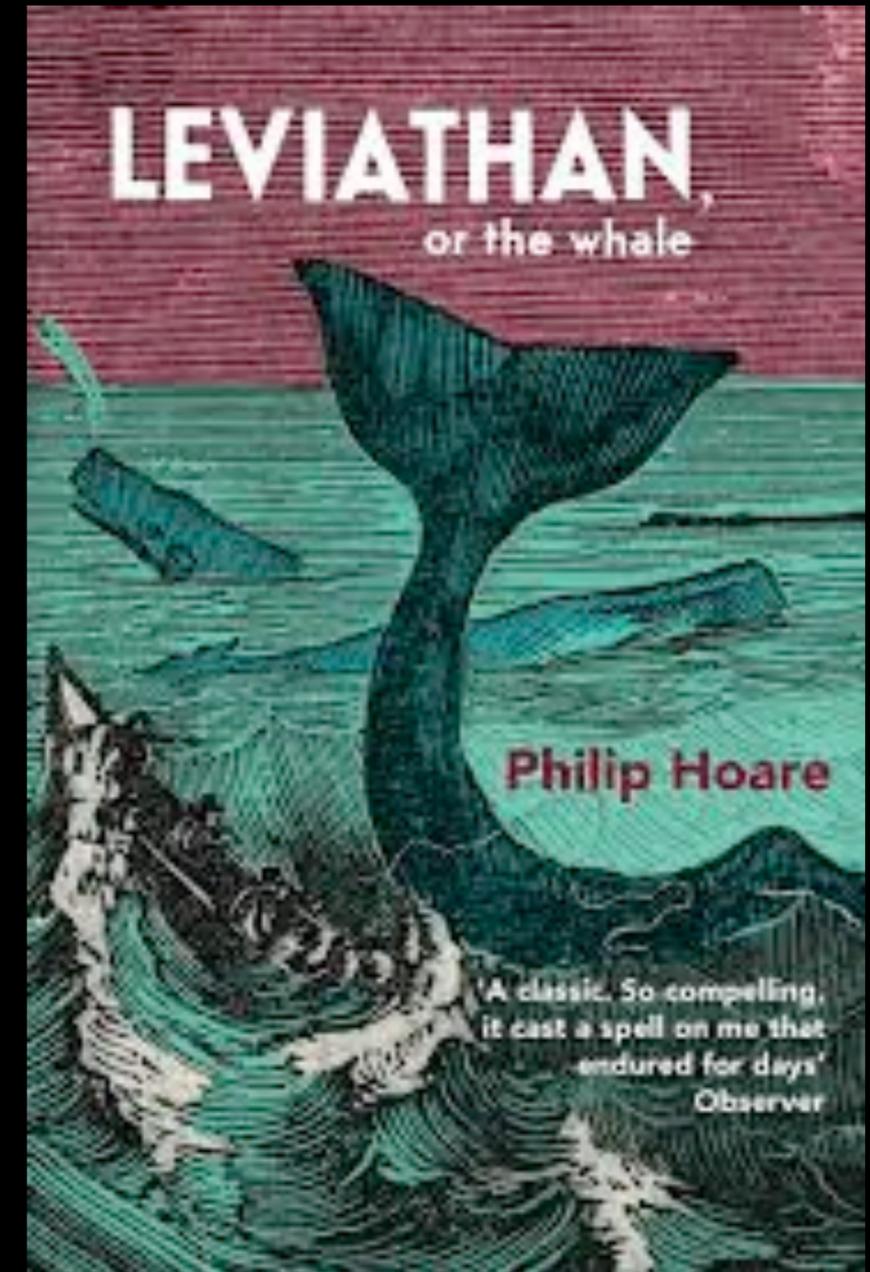


A corset made of silk, cotton, and whale bone, 1891



Whaling in early America (New England)

- In the 18th and 19th C whaling and slavery co-existed as lucrative, exploitative, transoceanic industries
- New England was an industry controlled by the Quakers
- 1840s: kerosene and coal gas were lighting city streets and houses
- 1851: *Moby-Dick* published
- 1859: Edwin Drake drilled for and discovered oil on a farm in PA
- By 1869: the last whaling ship left Nantucket
- —Philip Hoare, *Leviathan Or, The Whale* (Fourth Estate, 2008)



The (Whaling) Pacific as the Wild West

“The Pacific is, for an American, the Plains repeated, a 20th century Great West” (114)

-Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael* (NY: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947)

“whaling was the Wild West of the sea” (106)

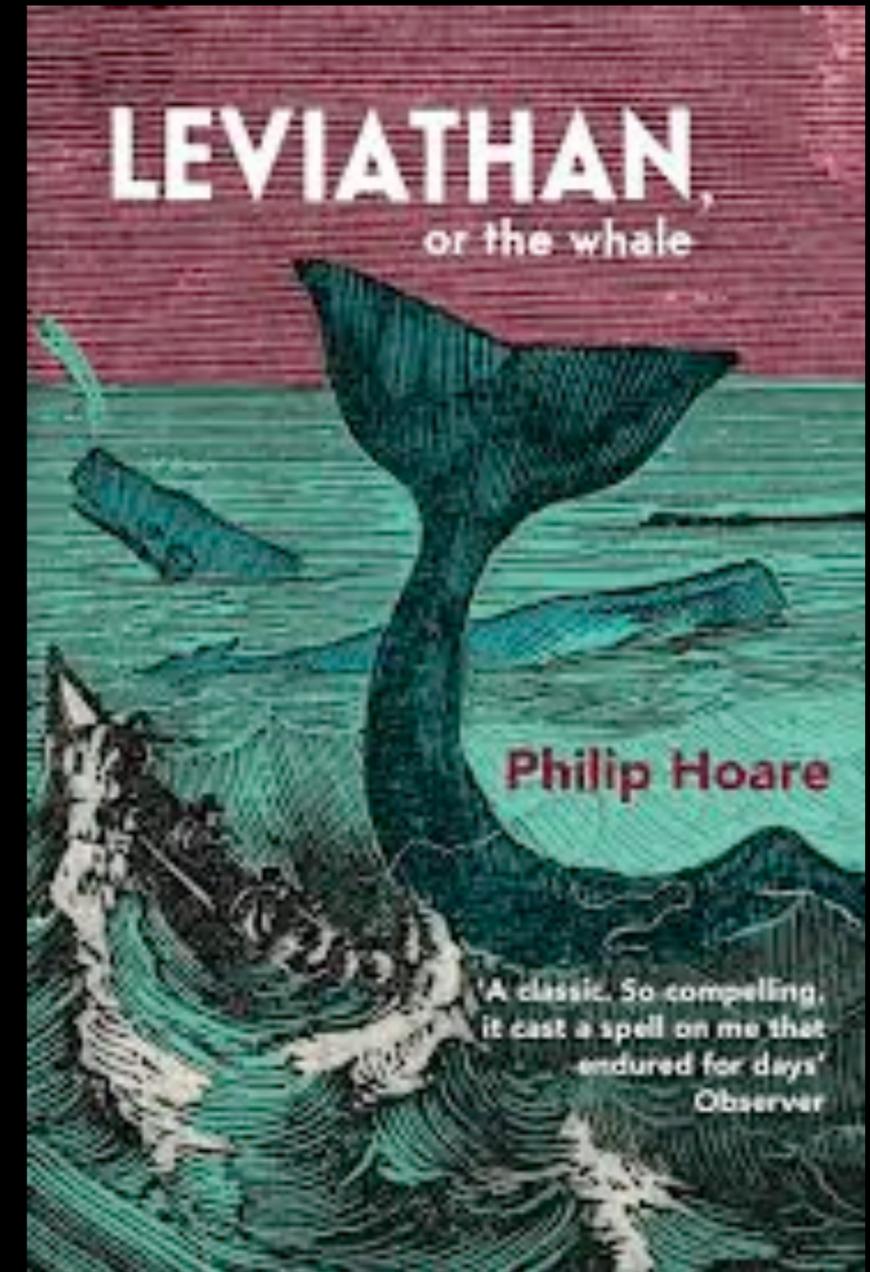
-Philip Hoare, *Leviathan Or, The Whale* (Fourth Estate, 2008)

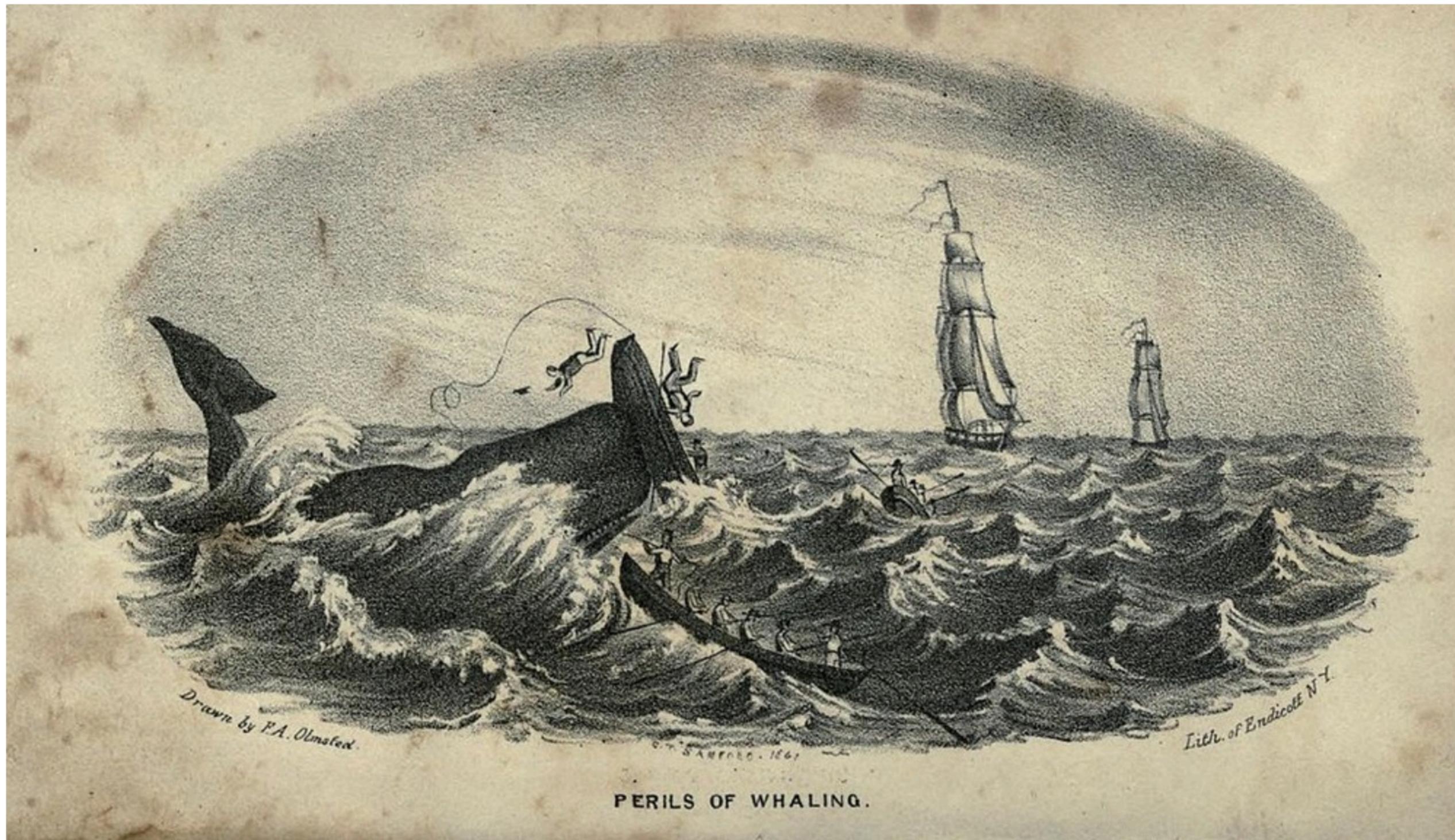
The (Whaling) Pacific as the West= effects

-“Whale-ships cleared the way for missions to the South Seas; whalers brought God as well as light to the world” (280)

As Europe suffered losses in millions, the entire population of humpbacks in South Atlantic were drive to extinction by 1918 (316)

- —Philip Hoare, *Leviathan Or, The Whale* (Fourth Estate, 2008)



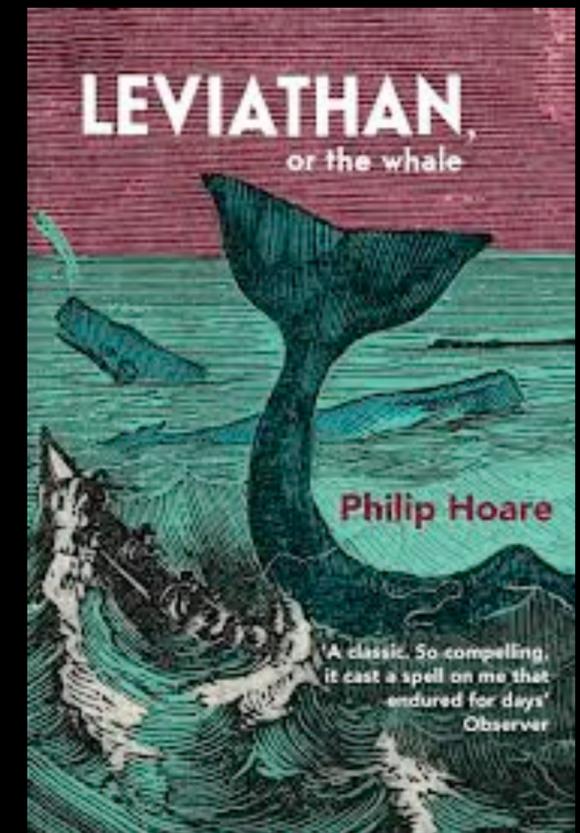


Perils of Whaling, sketch by F. A. Olmstead, 1841

Whalers as Heroes

-“On one side, the world’s greatest predator, more legendary than real; on the other, young American heroes, men who risked everything in the pursuit of oil. Theirs was a quest that asserted the myth of America, the great new democracy in which anyone might find their fortune” (173)

- —Philip Hoare, *Leviathan Or, The Whale* (Fourth Estate, 2008)



Herman Melville

- * 1819: born in NY,
- * family financial troubles & father's suicide
- * Went to work at 13. Went to sail at 20
- * 1841: sailed on whaler *Acushnet* for Pacific
 - * deserted ship and spent time in islands (Marquesas)
 - * experience on islands shaped him and his first novels
- * Returned to States and began writing
 - * *Typee*, *Omoo* sea-faring tales
 - * **“Because *Typee* and *Omoo* were his most popular books throughout his lifetime, many readers continued to see him as a literary sex symbol” (Norton, 468)**
- * Begin *Moby Dick* when he was 30
- * 1891: died with little literary reputation
 - * was rediscovered and revived as literary figure at end of 19th C: 1893-1927



Melville was a whaler (18 months on the Achusnet)

Ship Acushnet Whaling Journal Kept by W. Bowles Cooper, spanning the period July 18, 1845 thro.



Melville was a whaler (18 months on the Achusnet)

On January 3, 1841, the 359-ton square-rigged whaleship *Acushnet* left New Bedford harbor for the Pacific Ocean--among its crew the 21-year-old Herman Melville.

Melville was born to a prosperous family in New York City. When he was still a boy, his father's importing business went bankrupt. A distraught Alan Melville committed suicide, leaving his wife to care for eight children.

Desiring adventure and still reeling from his father's death, Melville sought to pacify his "reckless and rebellious side"; he signed onto the whaling crew on December 30, 1840. In the following 18 months, Melville not only learned about the whaling trade, but found inspiration for the American novel *Moby Dick*.

Melville was a sailor/whaler

TYPEE:
A PEEP AT POLYNESIAN LIFE.
DURING A
FOUR MONTHS' RESIDENCE
IN
A VALLEY OF THE MARQUESAS
WITH NOTICES OF THE FRENCH OCCUPATION OF TAHITI AND
THE PROVISIONAL CESSION OF THE SANDWICH
ISLANDS TO LORD PAULET.
BY HERMAN MELVILLE.
PART I.
NEW YORK:
WILEY AND PUTNAM.
LONDON:
JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET
1846.

- *Type: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846): his first book and a bestseller. He was 26 and a star.
- *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas* (1847)

OMOO:
A NARRATIVE OF ADVENTURES
IN THE
SOUTH SEAS.
BY HERMAN MELVILLE,
AUTHOR OF "TYPEE."
NEW YORK:
HARPER & BROTHERS, PUBLISHERS.
LONDON: JOHN MURRAY.
1847.

American Maritime Literature= an early tradition/ genre

FIRST: Romanticism

“The sublimation of the seas culminated in the empty seas of the Romantic sublime” (11)
-cleared of historical mariners, the seas was then open to imaginative repopulation by poets, novelists, etc.

THEN:

After a 75 year hiatus, the maritime novel was reinvented by James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pilot* in 1824 (133)

“Melville and Hugo invented the modernist novel from sea fiction, responding to the decline of craft” (200)

—Margaret Cohen, *The Novel and the Sea* (Princeton UP, 2010)

The Novel and the Sea

As the working age of sail receded, Melville, Conrad, Hugo reworked sea adventures fiction to dramatized skilled work in other edge zones that were murky and risky, the psyche and language (180)

‘Melville and Hugo invented the modernist novel from sea fiction, responding to the decline of craft’ (200)

Margaret Cohen, *The Novel and the Sea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

Some Historical Context

- Industrialization
- 1830 The Indian Removal act (President Andrew Jackson)
- 1837: Emerson's "American Scholar"
 - 1848: Marx and Engels' *The Communist Manifesto*
- 1850: Fugitive Slave Act
- 1851: *Moby-Dick* published
- 1859: Oil discovered on a farm in PA; end of whaling industry for oil
- 1861-65 Civil War
-

Take Aways?

- What does this reading and discussion add to our learning?
- Connections to Emerson reading?
- What questions does this raise for you?