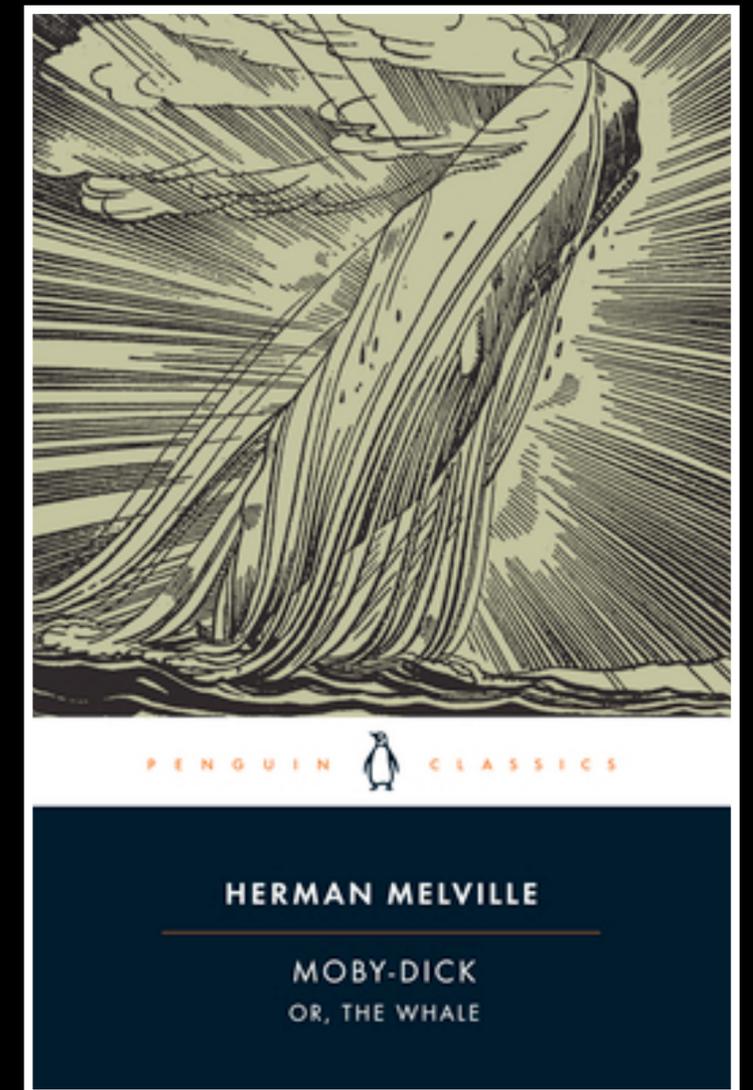


Moby-Dick

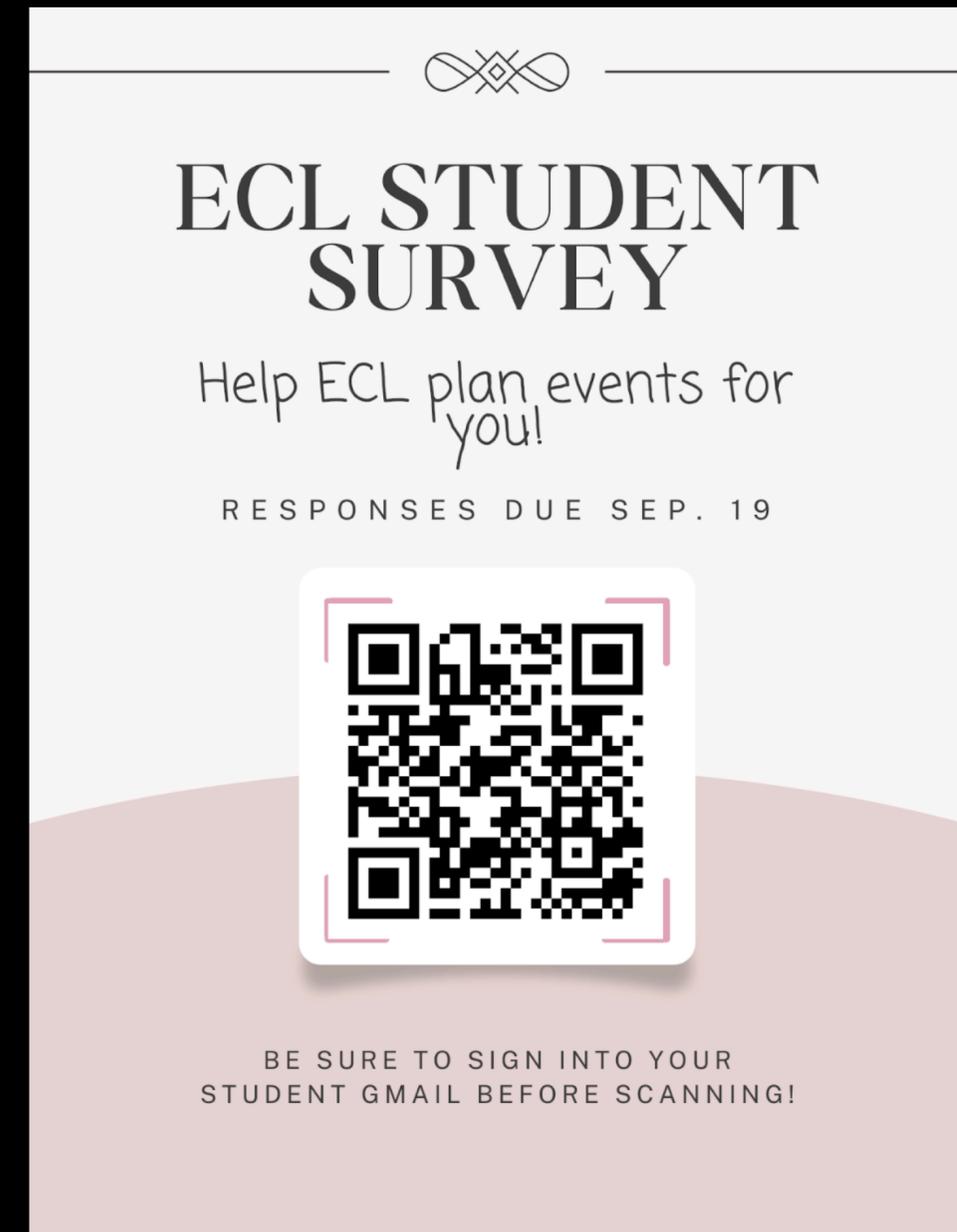
ECL 522: American Lit 1800-1860
Professor Jessica Pressman
Fall 2025

Day 6: Prefatory—Andrew Delblanco,
“Introduction” to the novel



ADMIN

- BLOGS— some of you only have 2!
- More Extra credit: Living Writers series
- REMINDER: no class on Tuesday
- Office hours.... Email me to set up additional times.



The poster features a decorative infinity symbol at the top center. Below it, the title "ECL STUDENT SURVEY" is written in a bold, serif font. Underneath the title, the text "Help ECL plan events for you!" is written in a casual, handwritten-style font. Below that, the deadline "RESPONSES DUE SEP. 19" is printed in a small, all-caps, sans-serif font. A large QR code is centered on the poster, enclosed in a white square with a thin red border. At the bottom, the instruction "BE SURE TO SIGN INTO YOUR STUDENT GMAIL BEFORE SCANNING!" is written in a small, all-caps, sans-serif font. The background of the poster is white with a light pink curved shape at the bottom.

ECL STUDENT SURVEY

Help ECL plan events for you!

RESPONSES DUE SEP. 19



BE SURE TO SIGN INTO YOUR STUDENT GMAIL BEFORE SCANNING!

Discussion

- Main take-aways from Steve Mentz visit?

Discussion

- Main insights, points from reading to discuss and question?

From your blogs

- KIT: DelBanco's belief that "*Melville...extracted a human sample from a culture he both loved and abhorred, and he made of the Pequod a kind of Noah's ark*" is absolutely fascinating (xxi). Yet more amazing still is the knowledge that these human capsules are still reflective of figures in power today. It's impossible to discern which is a more terrifying revelation: **That time is inevitably cyclical**, forever repeating the mistakes of the past with brighter clarity, or that the individuals in power frequently exhibit the same monomania of the doomed captain of the *Pequod*. Our ship continues to steer into darker, dangerous waters, my friends.

From your blogs- ship-focused

- **ANGIE:** This complex relationship with the ocean is confronted through the Ship. In this effort to decenter the terrestrial, the ship replaces the state, which “the dissolving force of oceanic history works against nationalism, though at times it may also tend in the directions of global or even imperial totality.(xvi)” The prevailing symbolism of the ship is, to many, an agent of imperialism and capitalism. The ship offers us a way to discuss the converging politics of the world, which have disrupted, uprooted, and scattered humans and cultures throughout the globe.

Novel as National Meditation

- “He wrote *Moby-Dick* in a messianic fervor because he wanted to save his country from itself” (xiii)
- It is “part of his lifelong meditation on America” (xiii)
- “Through these books [*Redburn, White Jacket*], Melville began to enlarges private trials into an allegory of the nation’s” (xiv)

Andrew Delblanco, “Introduction” (1992) to Penguin edition of *Moby-Dick*

Novel as National Meditation

- “Melville began to confront the gathering crisis of his time— the inevitable collision between industrial and slave culture in the United States” (xiv-xv)
- “*Moby-Dick* is not a medieval morality play with a decipherable iconography. **It is a disorderly elegy to democracy.**” (Xxi)

Andrew Delblanco, “Introduction” (1992) to Penguin edition of *Moby-Dick*

Historical Context

- * 1850: future of United States was up for grabs.....so too was the American literary scene.
- * 1850: **Fugitive Slave Act of 1850**: required that any escaped slaves be handed over to the authorities. Made slavery a national (not just Southern) problem
- * **Territorial Expansion:**
- * in 1850 US was pushing itself across the continent
 - railroad and steamboats started to connect county & very different people
- * **Mexican War 1846-1848**: annexation and invasion of Mexico. Territorial expansion.

1850-1851

- * **Compromise of 1850:** “By 1850 sectional disagreements related to slavery were straining the bonds of union between the North and South. These tensions became especially critical when Congress began to consider whether western lands acquired after the Mexican-American War would permit slavery. In 1849, California requested permission to enter the Union as a "free state" – meaning one where slavery was banned. Adding more "free state" senators to Congress would destroy the balance between "slave" and "free" states that had existed since the [Missouri Compromise](#) of 1820....But one aspect of the compromise – a strengthened fugitive slave act – soon began to threaten sectional peace.
—<https://www.archives.gov/>
- * **Missouri Compromise of 1820:** This legislation admitted Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a non-slave state at the same time, so as not to upset the balance between slave and free states in the nation. It also outlawed slavery above the 36° 30' latitude line in the remainder of the Louisiana Territory.
- * **Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854):** Officially titled "An Act to Organize the Territories of Nebraska and Kansas," this act repealed the Missouri Compromise, which had outlawed slavery above the 36°30' latitude in the Louisiana territories, and reopened the national struggle over slavery in the western territories.
- * **Dred Scott decision (1857):** Officially titled "An Act to Organize the Territories of Nebraska and Kansas," this act repealed the Missouri Compromise, which had outlawed slavery above the 36°30' latitude in the Louisiana territories, and reopened the national struggle over slavery in the western territories. Dred Scott (enslaved man) sued for freedom after living in Western state — lost.

When and How does *Moby Dick* intervene?

- * Politically and Culturally/ Context and climate of 1850s:
 - * “He wrote *Moby Dick* in a messianic fervor because he wanted to save his country from itself” (Andrew Delbanco, “Introduction” to Penguin edition, xiii)
 - * “... he made of the *Pequod* a kind of Noah’s ark. Its crew and officers are representatives of a nation..” (xxi)
- * Artistically:
 - * Structural Form of an ambitious work within the novel genre: “contrapuntal structure of the book” (xxvi)
 - * American Renaissance: fusion of literature and democratic ideals

Herman Melville



BIO

Pearl Street: Melville was born on August 1 1819—much of Manhattan was farmland ; most New Yorkers were British or Dutch by descent (42)

Melville's father, Allan Melvill= the e was added later as a claim of their Scottish ancestry (43). He was an importer of fancy goods and made many trips to Europe

-On both sides, Melville sprang from heroes. His paternal grandfather, Major Thomas Melvill, was an 'Indian' raider who tipped tea into Boston harbor in protest at British taxes. Gen. Peter Gansevoort had held Fort Stanwix in 1777 siege against British and Indians (43)

-bout of scarlet fever damaged his eyesight

1830 their father was declared bankrupt

-father died at 48 of maniacal fever, leaving his wife Maria with debt and 8 children.

-12 year old Herman was cast adrift. Left school to work in a bank, became surveyor on uncle's farm, went to frontier in St Louis and then returned to NYC

-didn't get job as lawyer clerk because his handwriting was so bad (44)

Herman Melville— more bio



Arrowhead Farm— Melville home in Berkshires
(Pittsfield, MA) 1850-1863

- * Grandfathers were Revolutionary war heroes
- * He married the daughter of a distinctive jurist
- * Settled into domesticity—1850 moved to Berkshire Farmhouse



The Writing of the Novel

- “*Moby-Dick* lurched forward and spasms rather than being built, systematically, according to some initial plan” (xvi)
- “his passionate friendship with Hawthorne, his work in person inspired him beginning in the summer of 1850, and has renewed exposure to Shakespeare” (xvi)
- “it is clear enough that as he rushed along, Melville had no particular concern to tidy up his book by sweeping it, clean the traces of its superseded stages” (xvi)
- “More than a crafted fiction, *Moby-Dick* is an outburst, the fluid consciousness”

Andrew Delblanco, “Introduction” (1992) to Penguin edition of *Moby-Dick*

The writing of Moby-Dick

The writing of Moby-Dick:

1850 Melville was 32. He moved his family from NYC to the Berkshires, the temporary home of his literary idol, Nathaniel Hawthorne (2)

-

-he was consumed by his story, writing until 4 pm without pausing to eat (3)

-his recent carnivorous reading of Shakespeare, Milton, Virgil, and others

From adventure story to Ahab & Moby Dick

Moby-Dick was two books written between February, 1850 and August, 1851 (35)
The first book did not contain Ahab; it may or may not have contained Moby Dick (35)

There is nothing on why in the summer of 1850, Melville changed his conception of the work as something 'mostly done' on August 7 and spent another full year in created what we now have (37)

Shakespeare was the cause. He book a book in Feb 1849—notes in fly leaf of the last volume— and everything changed.

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

Inspiration while writing

In England, Melville got a copy of *Frankenstein*—a novel about an errant genius who hunts down the quasi-human monster; inspired him (129)

-between bouts of writing, Melville visits Hawthorne frequently

Andrew Delbanco, Melville: His World and Work (Knopf 2005)

Melville on Shakespeare & print size

“ I am mad to think how minute a cause has prevented me hitherto from reading Shakspeare. But until now, every copy that was come-atable to me, happened to be **in a vile small print unendurable** to my eyes which are tender as young sparrows.”

—Letter to Evert Augustus Duyckinck (24 February 1849); published in *The Letters of Herman Melville* (1960) edited by Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman, p. 77

The End-Product

- “*Moby-Dick* is simply too large a book to be contained within one consistent consciousness subject of the laws of identity and physical plausibility” (xvii)
- “Everything becomes unmoored, vulnerable, dispensable” (xviii)

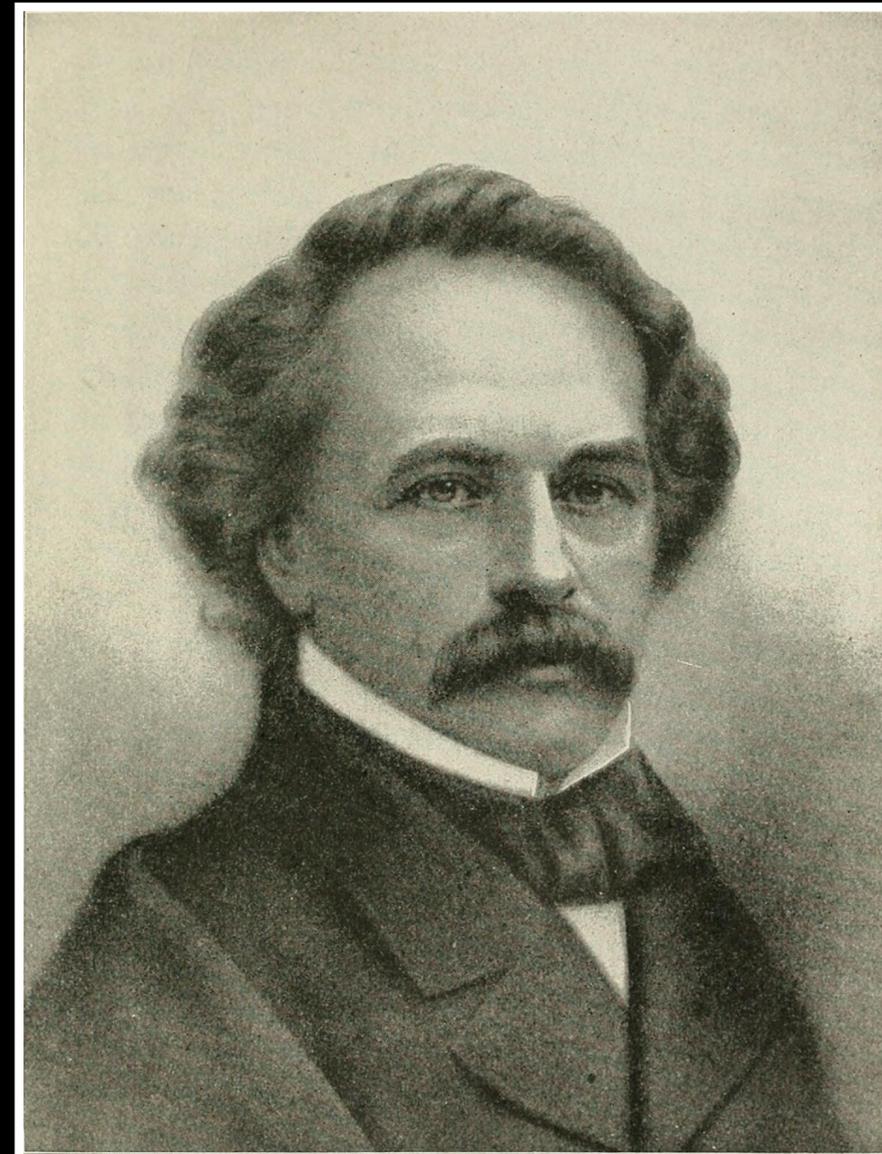
Andrew Delblanco, “Introduction” (1992) to Penguin edition of *Moby-Dick*

Melville meets Hawthorne

The two authors met for the first time on Monday August 5, 1850 in a gathering in the Berkshires by David Dudley Field

-they clearly liked each other right away (19)

Melville was struck by the already famous Hawthorne(46), who “was romantically handsome”;



Moby-Dick to dedicated to Hawthorne

IN TOKEN

OF MY ADMIRATION FOR HIS GENIUS,

This Book is Inscribed

TO

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE.

The famous letters

10 extant letters were written in the relatively short span of time, Jan 1851 for 6 months

Hawthorne's letters to Melville have been lost and may well have been destroyed by Melville (23)

Melville's letters to Hawthorne

Whence come you, Hawthorne? By what right do you drink from my flagon of life? And when I put it to my lips -- lo, they are yours and not mine. I feel that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the Supper, and that we are the pieces. Hence this infinite fraternity of feeling. Now, sympathizing with the paper, my angel turns over another page. you did not care a penny for the book. But, now and then as you read, you understood the pervading thought that impelled the book -- and that you praised. Was it not so? You were archangel enough to despise the imperfect body, and embrace the soul. Once you hugged the ugly Socrates because you saw the flame in the mouth, and heard the rushing of the demon, -- the familiar, -- and recognized the sound; for you have heard it in your own solitudes.

Nov 1851

•

Melville's letters to Hawthorne

“The divine magnet is in you, and my magnet responds. Which is the biggest? A foolish question —they are One.” (27)

-

*The Divine Magnet:
Herman Melville's letters to
Nathanael Hawthorne*
Edited by Mark Niemeyer
Orison Books, 2016

-

Letter to Hawthorne (1851)

"Your letter was handed to me last night on the road going to Mr. Morewood's, and I read it there. Had I been at home, I would have sat down at once and answered it. In me divine magnanimities are spontaneous and instantaneous – catch them while you can. The world goes round, and the other side comes up. So now I can't write what I felt. But I felt pantheistic then – your heart beat in my ribs and mine in yours, and both in God's. A sense of unspeakable security is in me this moment, on account of your having understood the book. **I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb.**" (N 545)

Melville on Hawthorne (sounding like Emerson)

* “Some may start to read of Shakespeare and Hawthorne on the same page. They may say, that if an illustration were needed, a lesser light might have sufficed to elucidate this Hawthorne, this small man of yesterday. ...Shakespeare has been approached. There are minds that have gone as far as Shakespeare into the universe.... Believe me, my friends, that Shakespeares are this day being born on the banks of the Ohio....Nor must we forget, that, in his own life-time, Shakespeare was not Shakespeare, but only Master William Shakespeare of the shrewd, thriving, business firm of Condell, Shakespeare & Co., proprietors of the Globe Theatre in London...This, too, I mean, that if Shakespeare has not been equalled, he is sure to be surpassed, and surpassed by an American born now or yet to be born.”

* “*Hawthorne and His Mosses*” (1850), a review of Hawthorne’s short story collection *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1850).

Melville's poetic on Hawthorne

- * Hawthorne has dropped germinous seeds into my soul. He expands and deepens down, the more I contemplate him; and further and further, shoots his strong New-England roots into the hot soil of my Southern soul." (23)
- * "*Hawthorne and His Mosses*" (1850), a review of Hawthorne's short story collection *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1850).

Melville's book review on Hawthorne: "Hawthorne and his Mosses: By a Virginian Spending July in Vermont" (1850)

"Let America then prize and cherish her writers, yea, let her glorify them"

"Let her own authors, I say, have the priority of appreciation"

"There are hardly five critics in America, and several of them are asleep"

"And now, my countrymen, as an excellent author, of your own flesh and blood,--an unimitating, and perhaps, in his way, an inimitable man--whom better can I commend to you, in the first place, than Nathaniel Hawthorne. He is one of the new, and far better generation of your writer."

"But it is better to fail in originality, than to succeed in imitation. He who has never failed somewhere, that man can not be great. Failure is the true test of greatness. And if it be said, that continual success is a proof that a man wisely knows his powers,--it is only to be added, that, in that case, he knows them to be small."

Take Aways?

Final Point:

- YOU ARE READY TO READ *MOBY-DICK*!
- Yes, you are.
- Go forth and enjoy!!