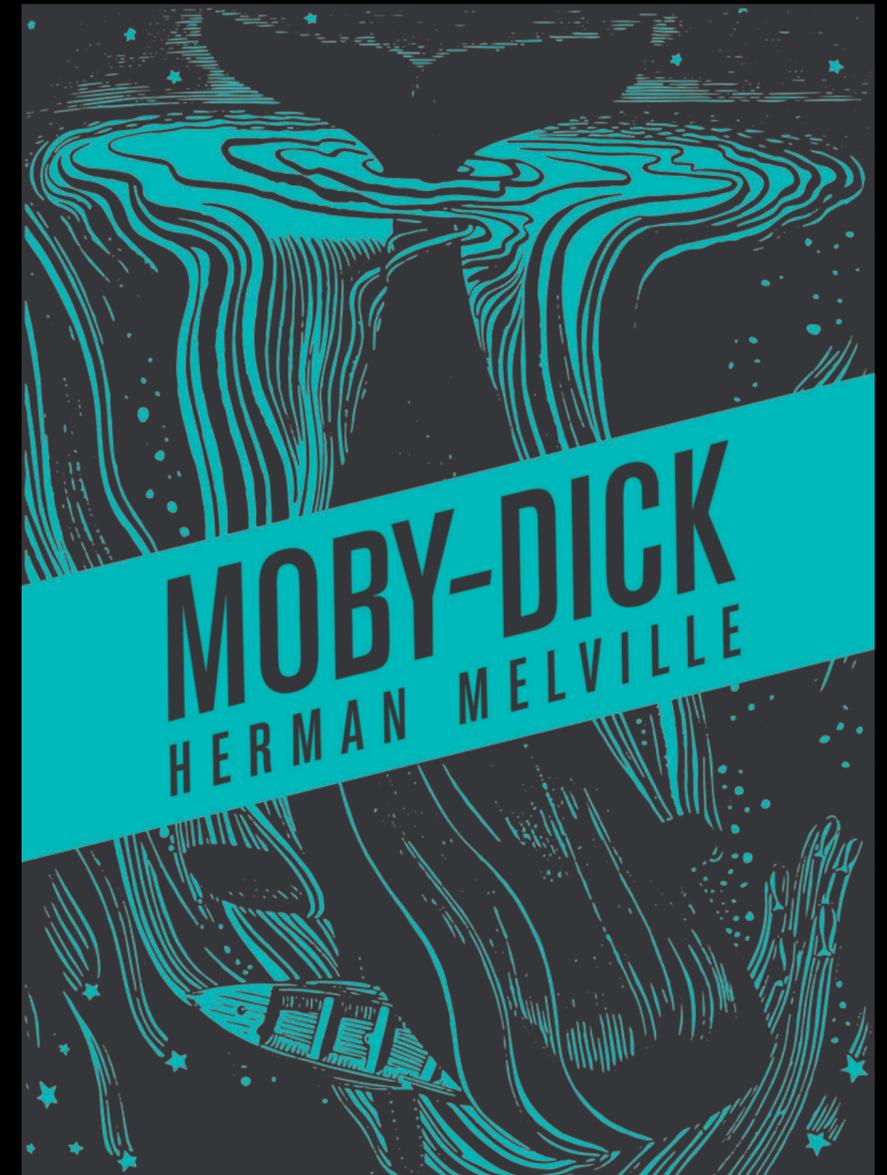


Moby-Dick

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



Day 14 : Chapters 37-42



October 29

Arts & Letters

Department of English and Comparative Literature

Q&A + OPEN HOUSE

Join ECL faculty & learn strategies for grad student success. Get your questions answered! Room AL-266.

12:00-1:00 PM

Meet + mix with ECL faculty, students, and organizations. Learn about 2026 courses. Get free candy! A&L Floor 2.

1:00-2:00 PM

Interested in tabling? Contact rporath@sdsu.edu.

ADMIN

Grading Rubric for Classroom Participation

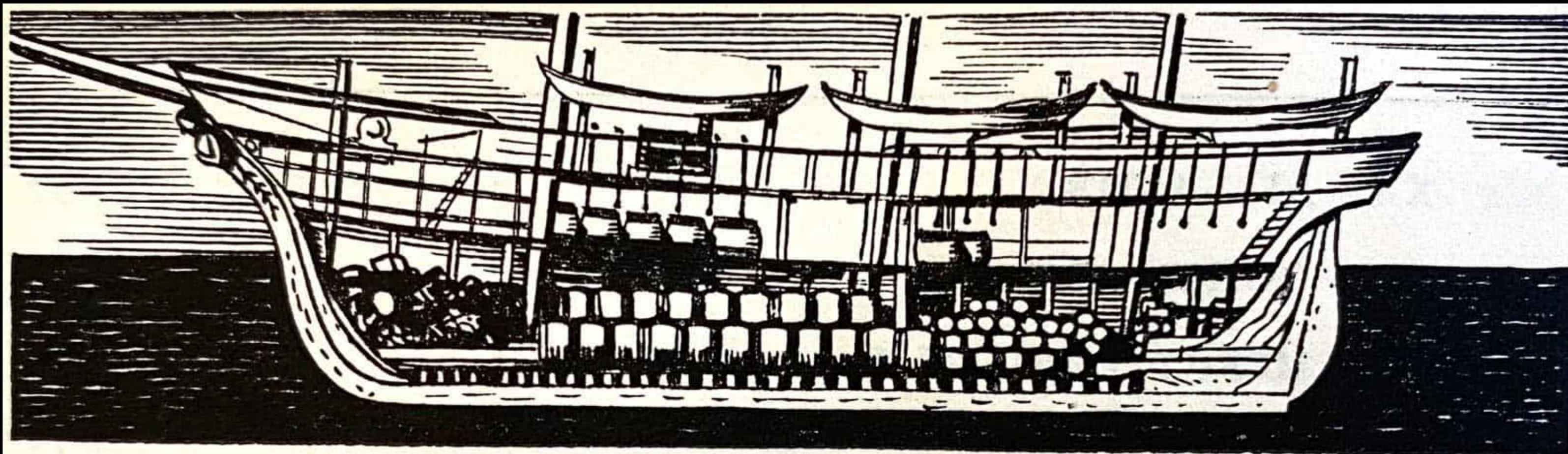
A= attend class regularly, prepared to participate, and participate actively (generously and generatively) in class discussion

B= attend class regularly, prepared to participate

C=attend class regularly

ADMIN

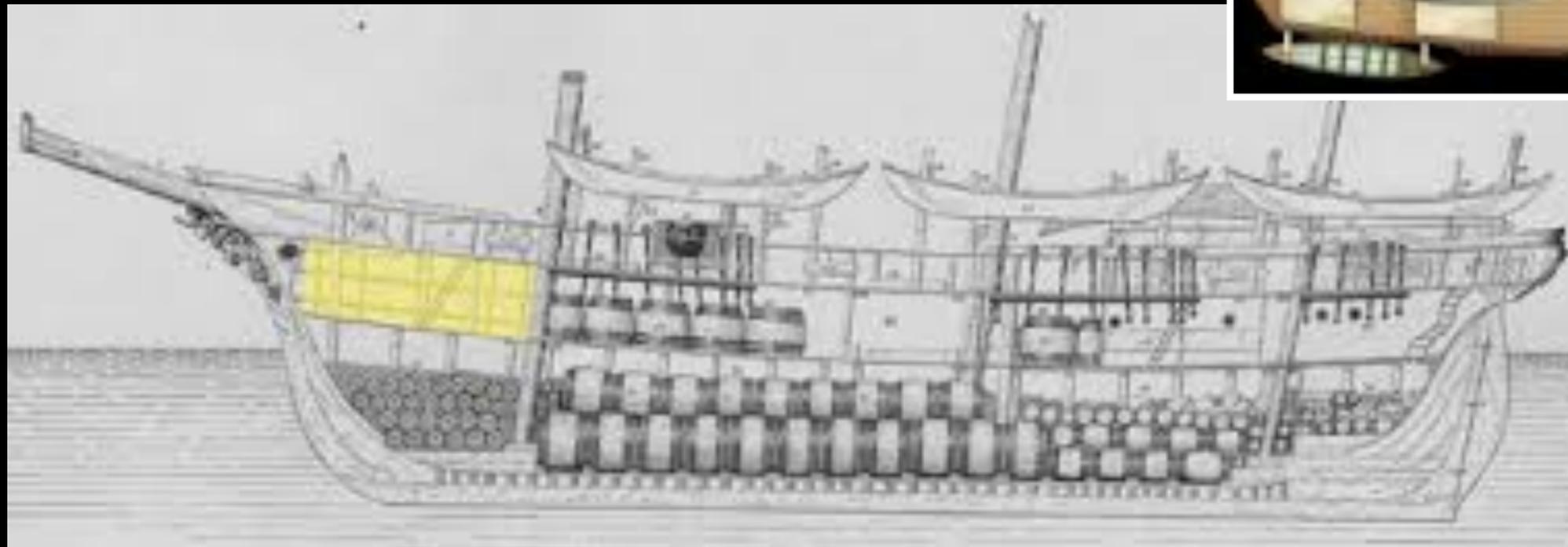
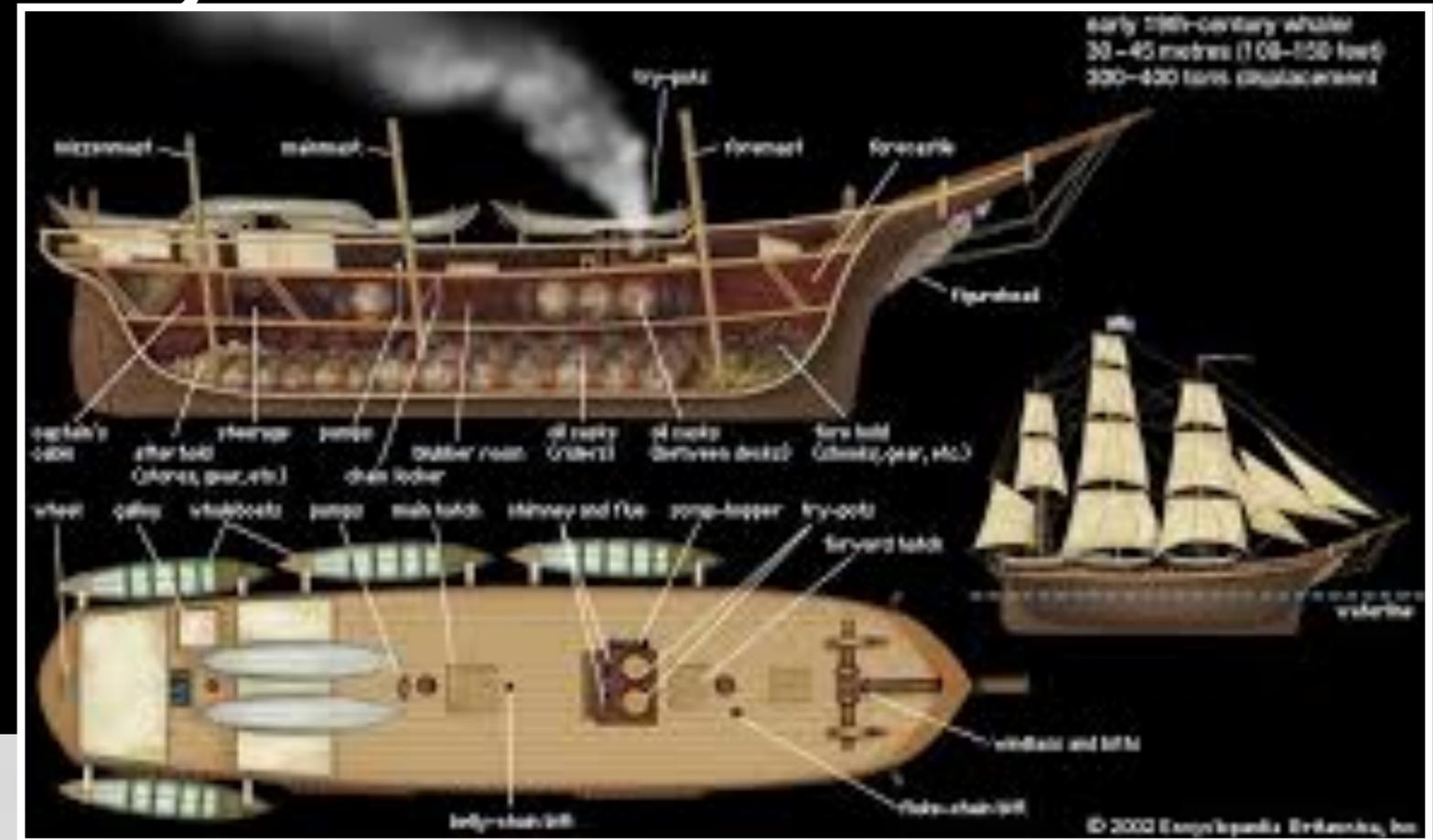
- Today— new seats and conversational partners!



Discussion

- What is exciting you, confusing you, moving you?
- Where do you want to dive in today?

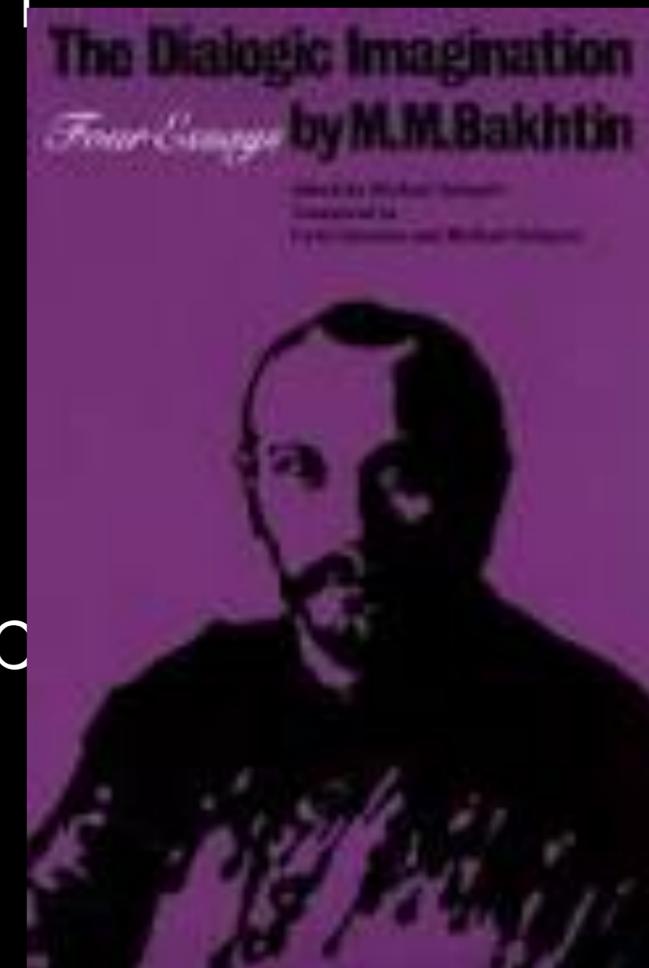
Ch. 40: Midnight, Forecastle



The Novel as Heteroglossia

The novel is heteroglossic; the plurality of voices in the novel genre. “other tongues” or “different languages.” All novels are polyphonic and this discourse disables authoritarian and monologic voice of author and/or his/her culture.

Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination* (pub 1975, written in 1930s)



Ch. 42: The Whiteness of the Whale

Though neither knows where lie the nameless things of which the mystic sign gives forth such hints; yet with me, as with the colt, somewhere those things must exist. Though in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright.

...Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows - a colorless, all- color of atheism from which we shrink?

From your blogs- Ch. 42— the whiteness of the whale

- DIEGO: Melville asks “or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows— a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink?” (212). What’s striking to me here is the contrast which Melville seems to love: this absence of, yet concrete of all colors, the “colorless, all-color”. It seems that this whiteness is another of the unanswerable questions, ungraspable phantoms of life that we are left to define for ourselves. This “dumb blankness, full of meaning” is nothing yet everything at the same time...the conflicting feelings that this whiteness puts upon us, perhaps a way of showing the indefinite nature of life itself.

Defining Whiteness in the U.S.

- One Eighth rule
- The “one-drop rule” — also known as hypodescent — dates to a 1662 Virginia law on the treatment of mixed-race individuals.
- “Not only does the one-drop rule apply to no other group than American blacks, but apparently the rule is unique in that it is found only in the United States and not in any other nation in the world.”
- —F. James Davis, *Who is Black? One Nation's Definition* (Penn State University Press, 1991)

Marxist/postcolonial appreciation in McCarthy era

“Ahab now utters words which strike at the very foundation of American civilization. He says, in effect, to hell with business and money” (1)
-a factory-like Pequod whose “captain of industry” leads the crew to their doom.

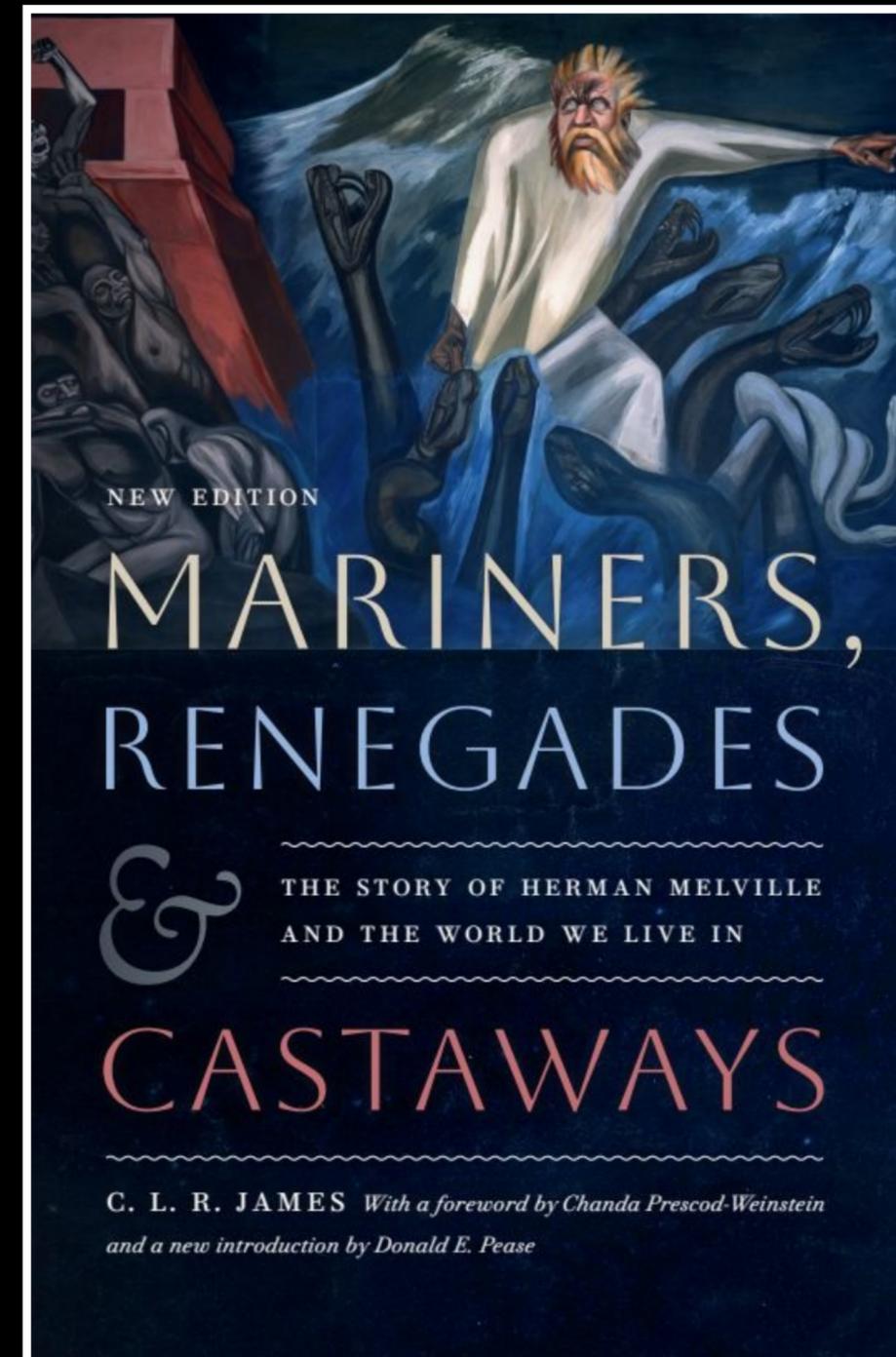
Melville ‘has painted a body of men at work, the skill and the danger’
(30)

“Their heroism consists in their everyday doing of their work” (30)

*Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways:
The Story of Melville and the World We Live in*

C.L.R. James

NY: 1963 (2025)



Historical Context: Territorial Expansion:

- * **Mexican War 1846-1848:** annexation and invasion of Mexico. Territorial expansion
- * 1850: future of United States was up for grabs.....so too was the American literary scene.
- * in 1850 US was pushing itself across the continent
 - railroad and steamboats started to connected county & very different people
- * 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= The Question of Slavery

* **The 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/>

Fugitive Slave Act (part of Compromise of 1850)

- * required citizens to assist in the recovery of fugitive slaves.
- * denied a fugitive's right to a jury trial (instead of jury, special commissioners)

\$150 REWARD.
RANAWAY from the subscriber, on the night of Monday the 11th July, a negro man named
TOM,
about 30 years of age, 5 feet 6 or 7 inches high; of dark color; heavy in the chest; several of his jaw teeth out; and upon his body are several old marks of the whip, one of them straight down the back. He took with him a quantity of clothing, and several hats.
A reward of \$150 will be paid for his apprehension and security, if taken out of the State of Kentucky; \$100 if taken in any county bordering on the Ohio river; \$50 if taken in any of the interior counties except Fayette; or \$20 if taken in the latter county.
July 12-84-tf
B. L. BOSTON.

\$200 Reward!

Ranaway from the subscriber, living in Saline county, on the 4th inst., two Negromen, named Jim and Jack--each aged about 25 years.

Jim
is dish-faced; has sore eyes and bad teeth; is of a light black or brown color; speaks quick, is about 5 feet 7 inches high; had on when last seen, blue cotton pants, white shirt, white fulled coat and new custom-made boots.



Jack
had on the same kind of clothing with shoes, has a very small foot, wears perhaps a No. 6 shoe, and has heavy tacks in the heels; is about the same height and color of Jim. They are doubtless aiming for K. T.

A reward of \$100 each will be given if taken outside of the State, or \$50 each if taken in the State, outside of Saline county.
C. D. WILLIAMS,
Spring Garden, P. O., Pettis county, Missouri.
Harrisonville, Mo., June 7th, 1860.

New England Transcendentalists and Unitarians were pissed

- * Ralph Waldo Emerson: “The Fugitive Slave Law—Lecture at New York” Lecture Read in the Tabernacle, New York City March 7, 1854

“I have lived all my life without suffering any known inconvenience from American Slavery. I never saw it; I never heard the whip... I never felt the check on my free speech and action, until, the other day, when Mr. Webster, by his personal influence, brought the Fugitive Slave Law on the country.[...] **Here was the question, Are you for man and for the good of man; or are you for the hurt and harm of man?** It was the question whether man shall be treated as leather? whether the Negro shall be, as the Indians were in Spanish America, a piece of money? **Whether this system, which is a kind of mill or factory for converting men into monkeys, shall be upheld and enlarged?** [...] There was an old fugitive law, but it had become, or was fast becoming, a dead letter, and, by the genius and laws of Massachusetts, inoperative. **The new Bill made it operative, required me to hunt slaves, and it found citizens in Massachusetts willing to act as judges and captors. Moreover, it discloses the secret of the new times, that Slavery was no longer mendicant, but was become aggressive and dangerous”**

Compromise of 1850

- * **Question/Concern: Would new territories (result of war with Mexico) in the West be slave states or not?**
- * Ever since the Missouri Compromise (of 1820), the balance between slave states and free states had been maintained
- * California petitioned to be free.
- * Dispute over land: Texas claimed that its territory extended all the way to Santa Fe.
- * These petitions challenged previous compromise: Missouri Compromis

Take Aways?