



# *Moby-Dick*

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

Day 24: The Canon & The Construction of Literary  
Value- How the Big Book Became the *Great* Big Book



# ADMIN

- Great work in Google doc on peer review!!
- You should have received feedback and grade for revised Essay 2, by email
- **Final project proposals** feedback posted to blog— if you did not receive a comment from me, you did not receive credit. Email me.
- Completion grade, not letter grade.
- Read and comment on each other's posts... —groups are forming on similar topics (e.g. Lixia and Alyssa G, Alyssa N and Arabelle). Next week== workshopping with groups.  
Check out TAGS on blog
- DO RESEARCH! And reread the prefatory readings!
- -how to do research... Project Muse

# Discussion

- Final project discussion/brainstorming together: in small groups—
- what are you struggling with? How can we help?

-“Though I wrote the Gospels in this century, I should die in the gutter”

-Herman Melville

# Contemporary Reviews

“This is an ill-compounded mixture of romance and matter-of-fact. The idea of a connected and collected story has obviously visited and abandoned its writer again and again in the course of composition. The style of his tale is in places disfigured by mad (rather than bad) English; and its catastrophe is hastily, weakly, and obscurely managed ... The result is, at all events, a most provoking book,—neither so utterly extravagant as to be entirely comfortable, nor so instructively complete as to take place among documents on the subject of the Great Fish, his capabilities, his home and his capture. Our author must be henceforth numbered in the company of the incorrigibles who occasionally tantalize us with indications of genius, while they constantly summon us to endure monstrosities, carelessnesses, and other such harassing manifestations of bad taste as daring or disordered ingenuity can devise...

We have little more to say in reprobation or in recommendation of this absurd book ... Mr. Melville has to thank himself only if his horrors and his heroics are flung aside by the general reader, as so much trash belonging to the worst school of Bedlam literature—since he seems not so much unable to learn as disdainful of learning the craft of an artist.”

–Henry F. Chorley, *London Athenaeum*, October 25 1851



# Contemporary Reviews

“Thrice unlucky Herman Melville! ... This is an odd book, professing to be a novel; wantonly eccentric; outrageously bombastic; in places charmingly and vividly descriptive. The author has read up laboriously to make a show of cetalogical learning ... Herman Melville is wise in this sort of wisdom. He uses it as stuffing to fill out his skeleton story. Bad stuffing it makes, serving only to try the patience of his readers, and to tempt them to wish both him and his whales at the bottom of an unfathomable sea ... Mr. Melville cannot do without savages so he makes half of his *dramatis personae* wild Indians, Malays, and other untamed humanities ... What the author’s original intention in spinning his preposterous yarn was, it is impossible to guess; evidently, when we compare the first and third volumes, it was never carried out ... Having said so much that may be interpreted as a censure, it is right that we should add a word of praise where deserved. There are sketches of scenes at sea, of whaling adventures, storms, and ship-life, equal to any we have ever met with ... Mr. Herman Melville has earned a deservedly high reputation for his performances in descriptive fiction. He has gathered his own materials, and travelled along fresh and untrodden literary paths, exhibiting powers of no common order, and great originality. The more careful, therefore, should he be to maintain the fame he so rapidly acquired, and not waste his strength on such purposeless and unequal doings as these rambling volumes about spermaceti whales.”

–*London Literary Gazette*, December 6 1851



# Moby Dick playlist

- Moby (the musician): For years, Moby has said that he was a distant relation of Herman Melville, and that his nickname was given to him by his parents at a young age in reference to his purported great-great-great-uncle.

# The story of the story

Herman Melville died on September 28, 1891, remembered, if at all, as an unusually honest customs inspector in New York City, where he had worked the docks for almost two decades. As a writer, though, he was almost forgotten.

But then, two decades after his death, his great work *Moby-Dick* was suddenly rediscovered. Since then, Melville has been elevated into the highest reaches of the American literary pantheon.

—\*I was fascinated to discover that O.W. Riegel (1903-1997) was renowned as an expert on propaganda who amassed a world-class collection of propaganda posters over his long life.

—Matthew Willis, “Melville Reborn, Again and Again” (2014)

# The novel in Melville's lifetime

It was virtually ignored in the author's lifetime—its first edition never sold out, and the remaining copies went up in flames in a fire in the publisher's downtown Manhattan warehouse in 1853.

# Revival of Reputation via Modernism

In 1923, D. H. Lawrence published his idiosyncratic, if not faintly crazy, “Studies in Classic American Literature.” Lawrence proclaimed Melville to be “a futurist long before futurism found paint,” the author of “one of the strangest and most wonderful books in the world.” Lawrence’s paean was only the public eruption of a reputation already in revival. The year before, in 1922, T. E. Lawrence, of Arabia fame, reported that “Moby-Dick” took prime position on his “shelf of ‘Titanic’ books (those distinguished by greatness of spirit),” and two years after that, in 1924, noted, “Someone is working a Melville boom, & I’ve sold all my early editions profitably.”

In the summer of 1936, the aristocratic aesthete the Honourable Stephen Tennant was entertaining his friend Morgan Forster, at tea in a genteel hotel in the English Home Counties, talking avidly of Queequeg. Could Melville have ever imagined that his book would travel so far, and find such unlikely readers?

—Philip Hoare, “What Moby Dick Means to Me” *The New Yorker* (2011)

# Discussion

- What interests you? What do you want to discuss?
- What questions do you have for the class?

# From your blogs- reading/readers in context

- SOPHIA: Riegel mentions on page 200 that the recent revival of *Moby Dick* has been in the context of modern psychology and philosophy..Yet who a person is makes a book all the more interesting. So should we read this novel as a conscious, intentional novel? Or as a subconscious, projective novel? Does it matter, if we are just projecting our own selves onto the writing?

# From your blogs- cultural categories

- ANGIE: Finally, we have some insight into why Moby Dick, may not have been as popular as Melville had hoped. The British hated it, or as O.W. Riegel puts it, “were unable to see it as “anything more than a poorly constructed whaling story(196).” His novel was “tested against the canons of unity, coherence, and emphasis (196),” and within this lens could not have had any hope of succeeding...We can appreciate this novel now for what it was, an intentionally experimental novel, of which now many abound, and can point to this great American novel, as its forefather, the most experimental of all experimental novels.
- it was going against the English literary canon “tested against the canons of unity, coherence, and emphasis. (196).” However, instead of attempting to measure up to the great literary creations of authors past, Melville resisted and created something entirely new, not just a book about whaling (action), but about whaling (industry), completely reliant on the labor it gently coaxed and roughly extorted from free, enslaved, and ostracized people. He commented on the most important issues of his time, and even of ours, so many years in the future, using the novel to reflect the people he was speaking to, Americans.

# Literary History: Melville's Changing Reputation

- \* **D.H. Lawrence** on *Moby Dick* as great American novel (*Studies in Classic American Literature* 1923)
- \* “It is the same old thing as in **all Americans**. They keep their old-fashioned ideal frock-coat on, and an old-fashioned silk hat, while they do the most impossible things. There you are: you see Melville hugged in bed by a huge tattooed South Sea Islander, and solemnly offering burnt offering to this savage's little idol, and his ideal frock-coat just hides his shirt-tails and prevents us from seeing his bare posterior as he salaams, while his ethical silk hat sits correctly over his brow the while. That is **so typically American**: doing the most impossible things without taking off their spiritual get-up. Their ideals are like armour which has rusted in, and will never more come off.” (emphasis added)

# Re-appreciating Moby-Dick in the early 20th C

“Melville was a nineteenth-century author writing for a twentieth-century audience,” explains Columbia professor [Andrew Delbanco](#), author of the 2005 biography [\*Melville: His World and Work\*](#). He used stream of consciousness long before Stein or Joyce; he acknowledged America’s predatory power as well as its great promise; he defied convention in writing about sex; and perhaps most shocking of all, he took seriously the possibility of a godless universe. In his time, there was a limited market for these insights and innovations.”

<https://magazine.columbia.edu/article/how-scholars-rescued-author-moby-dick-waters-oblivion>

**Why rediscovered in the 1920s/30?**

WHY THE MODERNIST PERIOD FOR MOBY-DICK??

## EXPERIMENTS IN ART ACROSS ART FORMS



knowing-looks-interchanged.-Hungarian- - - - -  
rhapsodic-adolescent-days-Harry-doing-violin- - - -  
chores-while-Maw-hustled-red-sweating-panting- - -  
brothers-carrying-pails-around-farm.-Crucial-day- -  
dawns.-Harry-a e t a t-eighteen-Father-asks:- - - -  
Whatho!-Dull-boy-work-or-play?-Harry-sighs- - - -  
c a d e n z a-Maw-sobs-l a r g h e t t o-musical- - - -  
interlude-d u o-Harry-nobly-rises-occasion-plays- -



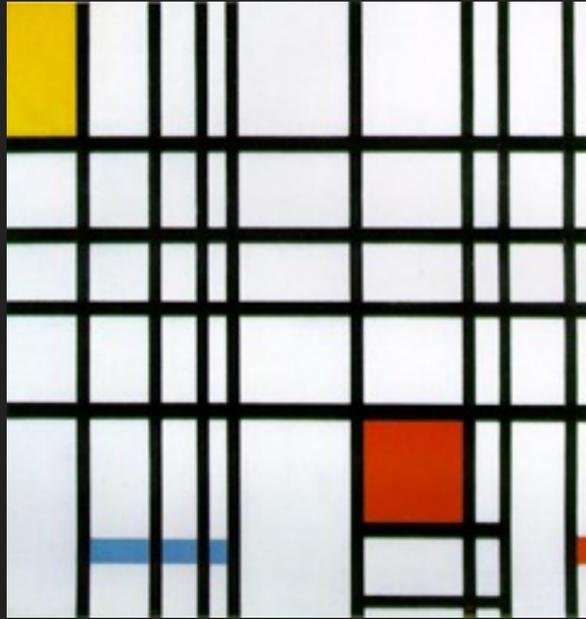
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# ARCHITECTURE



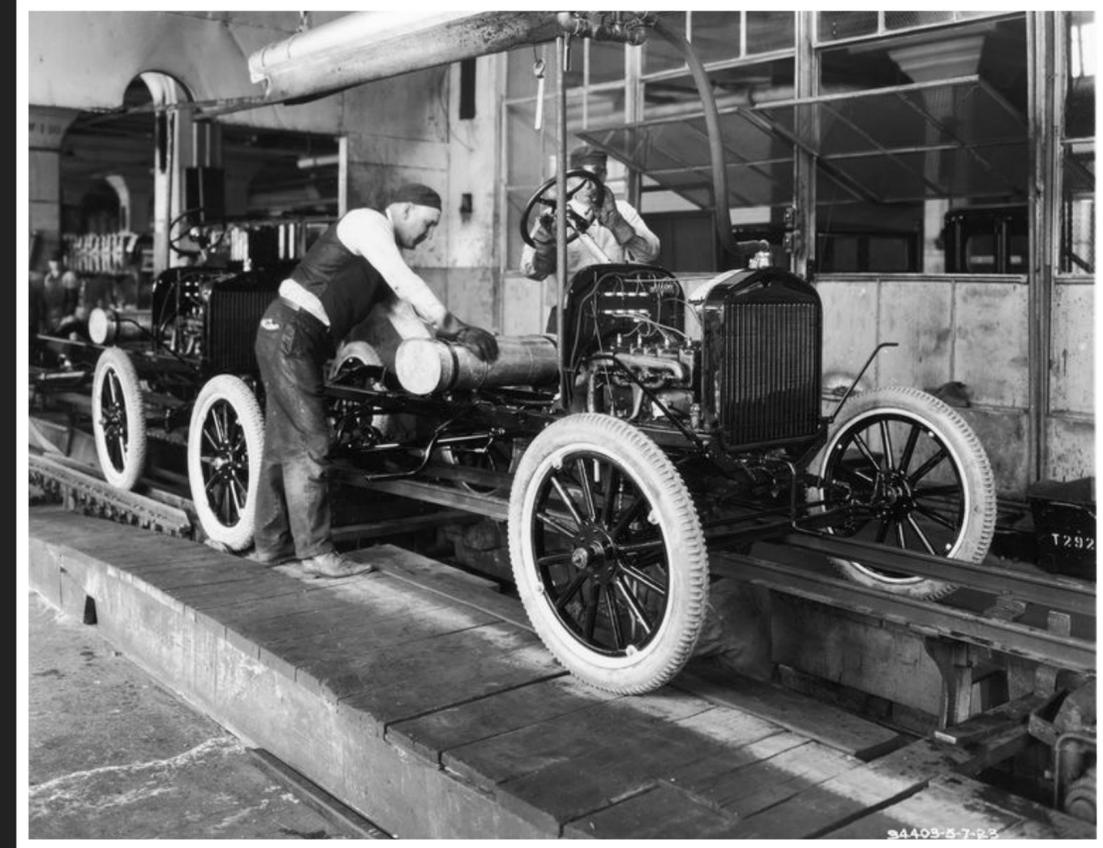
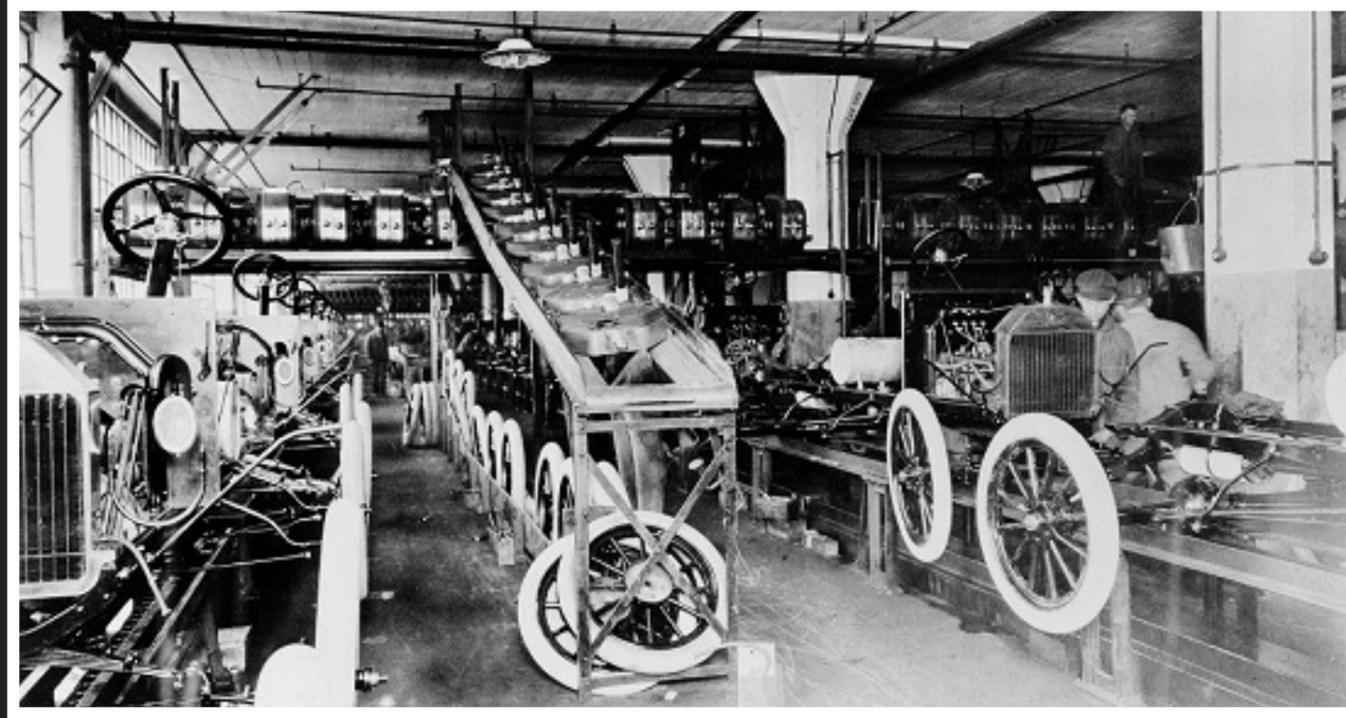
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# EXPERIMENTS IN ART ACROSS ART FORMS



Margaret Bourke-White, Turbine, Niagara Falls Power Co., 1928, gelatin silver print.

# INDUSTRIALIZATION AND MECHANIZATION



## TECHNOLOGY AND MEDIA

- ▶ radio
  - ▶ wireless telegraphy 1905
- ▶ telephone
- ▶ pocket watches
- ▶ film
- ▶ cars
- ▶ bicycle
- ▶ airplanes
- ▶ industrial machines and assembly lines (1913)

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# DANCE

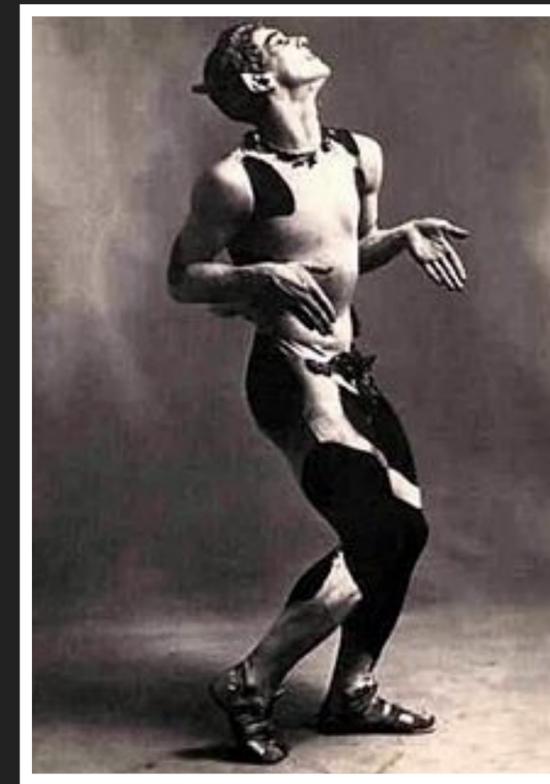
- ▶ modernist dance
- ▶ "The Rite of Spring" ballet (1913), Stravinsky, Nijinsky
- ▶ caused a riot



▶ Isadora Duncan



▶ Martha Graham



▶ Vaslav Nijinsky

# O.W. Riegel, “The Anatomy of Melville’s Fame” (1931)

Indeed, there was always a sharp difference of opinion between British and American criticism of Melville during his creative period, a fact which has not hitherto been stressed by Melville’s biographers. Ill feeling, national pride, and a patronizing attitude toward America help to explain the severe condemnation by the English of Melville’s “Yankeeisms” and “Go-ahead method.” They

- p. 196
- p. 197

Academic criticism abounded in plagiarism and paraphrase of previous criticism, and it was apparent that few of the literary historians bothered to read Melville with any degree of critical insight, if at all. More important as indicative of an abiding interest in Melville were the references to him by men of letters and literary amateurs on both sides of the Atlantic. The extent of the interest in Melville among the reading public can never be determined accurately, because the opinions of ordinary readers do not often find their way into print; but a sufficient number of professional writers left comments on Melville to prove the existence of a following, however small it might be. Among the more important

# Modernist writers

The biographical enthusiasm reached its climax in D. H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1922), Carl Van Vechten's essay in *The Double Dealer* (January, 1922), and especially, in Lewis Mumford's *Herman Melville* (1929). Van Vechten clearly revealed the attitude of this group of critics:

- p.201

It ought to be remembered that the epic hero, the “Herman Melville” of the modern critics, is an American created by Americans. Differences in national psychology may account for the failure of the English to catch the spark of enthusiasm for this figure. Much

- p.202

- 3 revival attempts at Melville's reputation: England 1880s, England and US 1891, 1914/1919

- p.200

Melville boom which is still going on in this country. The "new" Melville criticism, the reinterpretation of the character of Melville and of his work in the light of modern psychology and philosophy, is essentially an American phenomenon.

# D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1922)

## **XI. HERMAN MELVILLE'S "MOBY DICK"**

*MOBY DICK, or White Whale.* A hunt. The last great hunt. For what?

For Moby Dick, the huge white sperm whale: who is old, hoary, monstrous, and swims alone; who is unspeakably terrible in his wrath, having so often been attacked; and snow-white.

Of course he is a symbol.

Of what?

I doubt if even Melville knew exactly. That's the best of it.

# Rockwell Kent's edition 1930

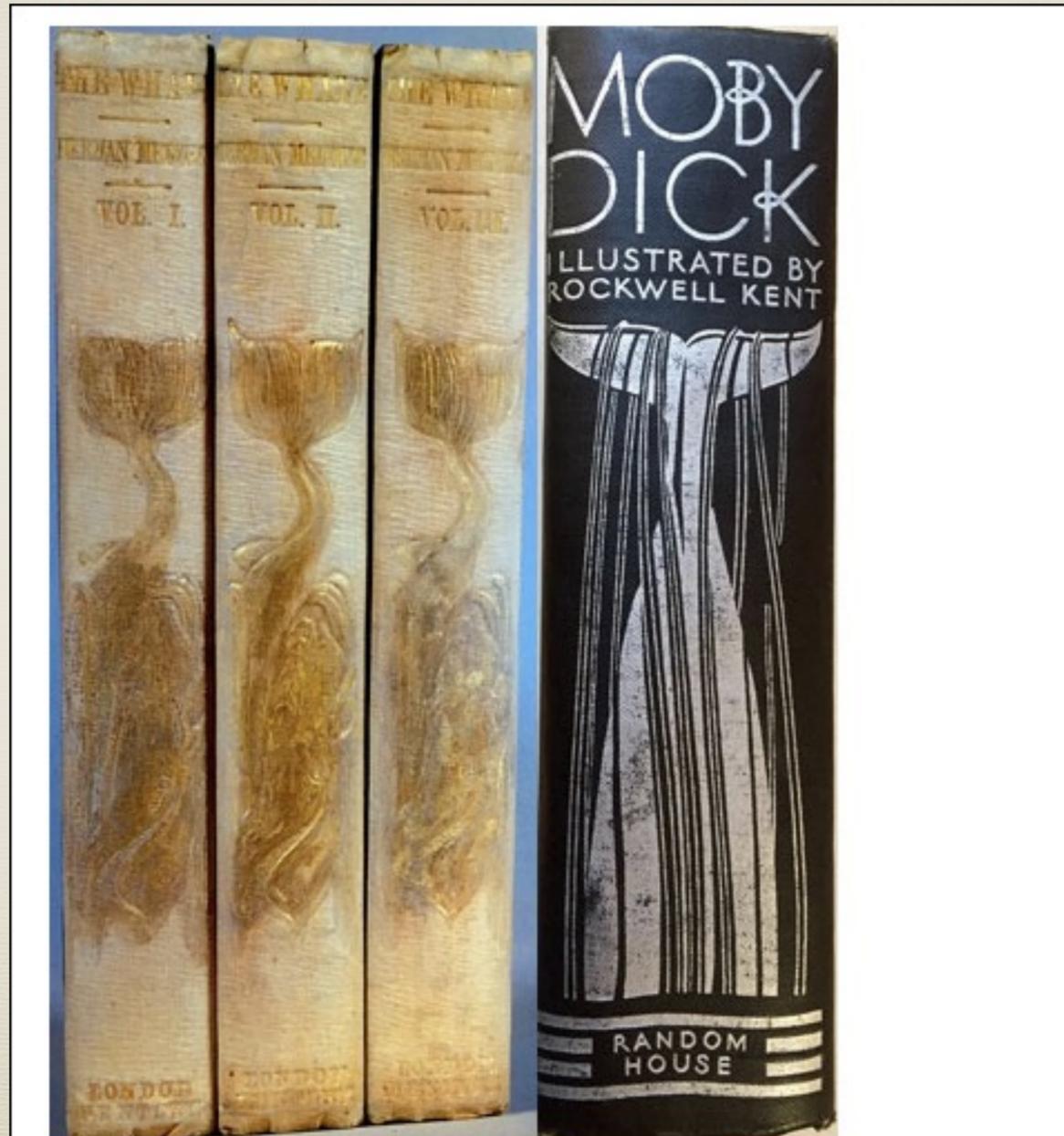
The true turning point came in 1926, when Thomas Donnelly of Lakeside Press announced the Four American Books campaign, meant to showcase American writing and printing. William Kittridge, head of design and typography, reached out to Rockwell Kent and asked him to illustrate Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*. Kent suggested *Moby Dick* instead, and the rest was history. In the words of Kittridge, the result was "the greatest book done in this generation" and "the greatest illustrated book ever done in America."

Kent's illustrations came out in a large, three-volume limited edition for Lakeside Press, as well as a trade edition for Random House. It was this trade edition that rocketed *Moby Dick* to fame, and introduced the public to one of the greatest matches between illustrator and subject matter in the history of printing. Kent saw his ink and wash illustrations as "literary woodcutting," jet-black doorways into the "midnight darkness enveloping human existence, the darkness of the human soul, the abyss, – such is the mood of *Moby-Dick*."

Less bulky than the limited edition, the beautifully designed 1930 Random House trade edition offered people an eminently readable way to experience this remarkable union of literary and artistic genius.

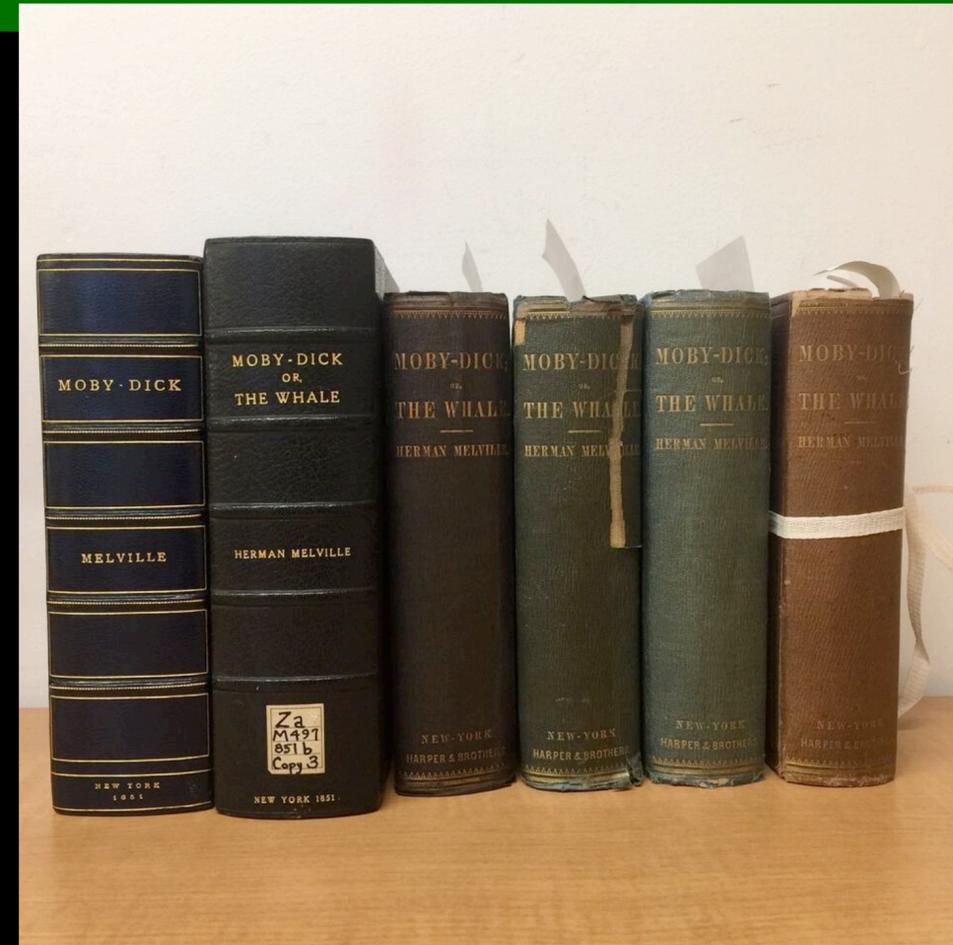
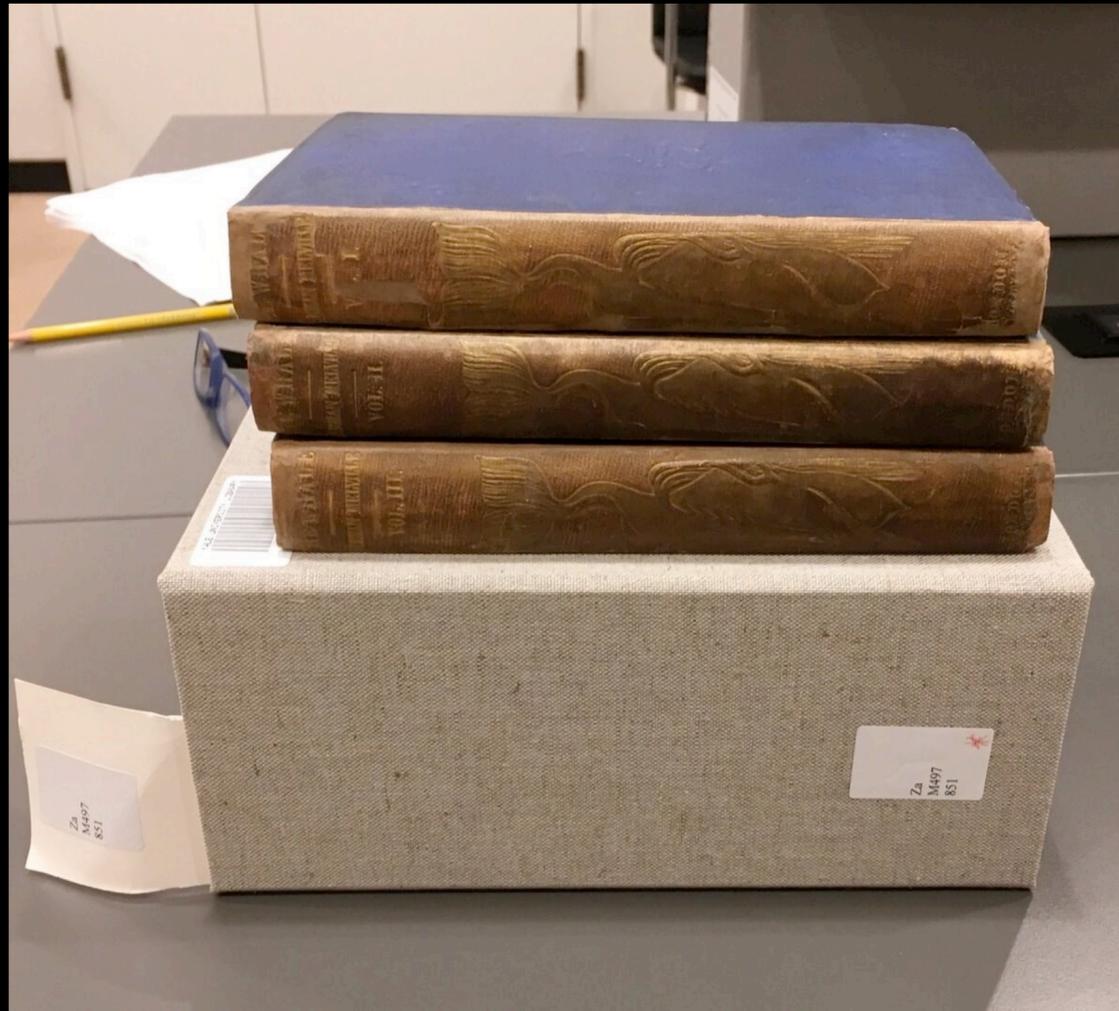
<https://www.manhattanrarebooks.com/pages/books/2845/herman-kent-melville-rockwell/moby-dick-moby-dick>

# Publication History



*Left: spines of the 1851 three-volume set (The Whale); Right: spine of Rockwell Kent's 1930 edition.*

# Publication History



In order to secure Melville's copyright in the US and in Great Britain, *Moby Dick* was published almost simultaneously in both places. The novel was published in London by Richard Bentley on **October 18, 1851**, and then in the US, by Harper and Brothers, on November 14, 1851 — —Nancy Kuhl, Yale Beinecke Library <https://beinecke.library.yale.edu/article/moby-dick-context-and-resources>

# Publication History

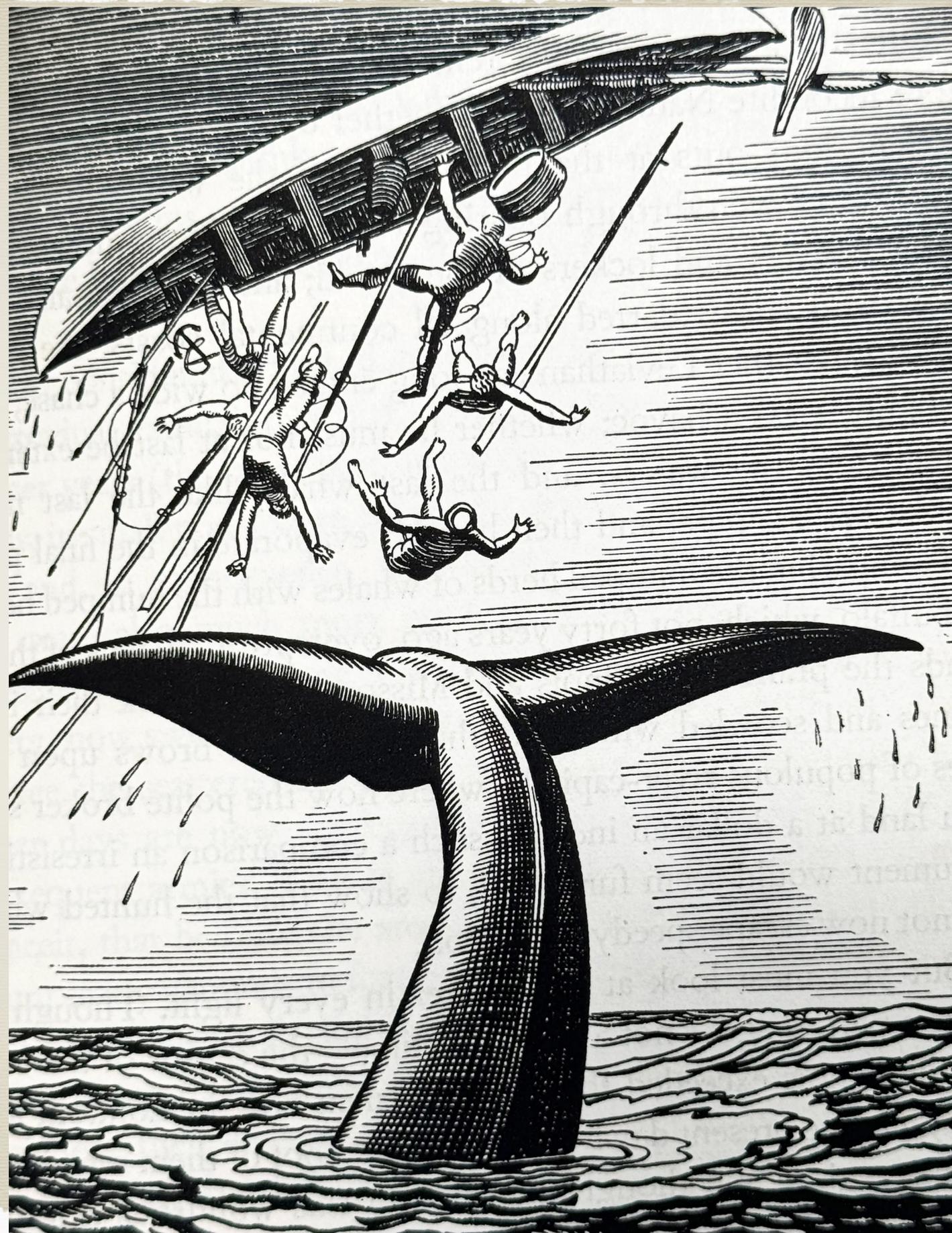
Though less than a month separated the two publication dates, there are roughly 600 substantive differences between the two texts; the British edition is some 2000 words shorter than the US publication. There is little hard evidence about how and why the many changes between the two editions were made.

Though many of the changes are minor—“covertly” for “correctly” and “death-grasp” for “death gasp”—some are significant. For example, among many deletions of political content, chapter 25 is left out of the UK edition entirely. Still more critical: the all-important epilogue does not appear in the UK edition. This deletion, possibly a printing error, may especially have informed the novel’s poor reception among British reviewers and readers

—Nancy Kuhl, Yale Beinecke Library <https://beinecke.library.yale.edu/article/moby-dick-context-and-resources>

# MOBY DICK

ILLUSTRATED BY  
ROCKWELL KENT

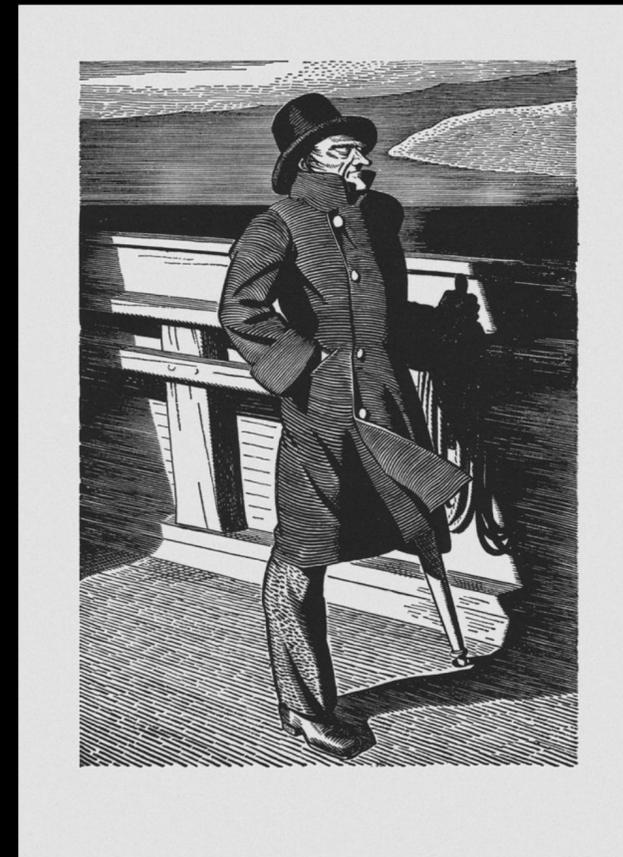




# Influence of Melville and *Moby Dick*

- Faulkner hung a framed print  
of Rockwell Kent's Captain  
Ahab in his living room in  
Oxford, Mississippi

-claimed that *Moby-Dick* was  
the one novel he wished he had  
written



Jerome McGann, “The Great Final  
Hash of *Moby-Dick*” in Leviathan  
(Volume 21, Number 2, June 2019)

“*Moby-Dick* declares at the start that it is made from what was earlier made in other books. The parodies therefore serve a significant double function: they show the conscious artistic purpose at work with materials that are rich with inherited meanings, and they provide readers with a rhetorical ground for an equivalent mode of reading. *Moby-Dick* keeps inviting us to watch how it is being made from other books. **The whaling voyage then becomes a reading voyage** more perilous than the tale that is its primary vehicle. All the parodies in *Moby-Dick*—from the front matter through the playbill in “Loomings” to the final “Epilogue”—**are there to make sure we do not fall asleep at our reader’s mast-heads. We are to read the book as sailors at whale-watch, with attention, lest we fall into reading reveries more dangerous...**”

# Take Aways?