



A MUSICAL RECKONING

MOBY DICK

TOOLKIT

EXPER
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art.

2019/20 Season



Welcome!

This Toolkit contains resources meant to encourage a deep dive into ***Moby-Dick***, which sails into the A.R.T. in December 2019. This new musical, written and composed by Dave Malloy and directed by Rachel Chavkin, is an adaptation of Herman Melville's classic American novel.

After publishing *Moby-Dick* in 1851, Melville went from reputed author to one facing a great deal of criticism from the literary community. However, over 150 years later, his book is considered one of the great American novels. This production of ***Moby-Dick*** uplifts the genius of Melville's novel while also bringing contemporary conversations to the story through music, dance, puppetry, and more.

The articles, resources, and activities in this Toolkit are curated for the use of learners of all ages, in and out of the classroom, who are looking to take a close look into the world of ***Moby-Dick***. Inside these pages, you will find materials on the development and context of ***Moby-Dick***, including insights from the playwright and an overview of the play, as well as information about the set, costumes, and history of whaling.

See you at the theater!

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MOBY-DICK TOOLKIT

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Thank you for participating in the A.R.T. Education Experience!

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Moby-Dick in Production



When theater artists craft an adaptation of a popular piece of literature, many moving parts have to have to be synthesized to create the show you see on stage. The ***Moby-Dick* in Production** section of this Toolkit (pages 5-20) contains resources on how the show all comes together. Read on to hear from the playwright (page 7), director (page 10), scenic designer (page 14), costume designer (page 16), puppet director and puppet designer (page 19) and choreographer (page 20) about their sources of inspiration for the show and how each played a unique role in bringing their ideas to life.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What inspired this show?
- Who do you think will most enjoy this play? Why?
- What excites you about this adaptation?
- Why is it important to continue retelling classic stories in new, diverse ways?

Moby-Dick Summary

Moby-Dick, a new musical written and composed by Dave Malloy, directed by Rachel Chavkin, follows the tale of Ishmael, a young, sprightly man, as he boards the whaling ship, the *Pequod*. Once aboard, Ishmael meets the various crew members who hope to profit from this lucrative business. The crew consists of first mate Starbuck, second mate Stubb, and third mate Flask. In the book, these characters are all white men, though this theatrical adaptation casts these characters differently. The mates oversee the harpooners, Fedallah, Queequeg, Tashtego, and Daggoo. In the book, these characters are composites of specific indigenous and non-European cultures from around the world, a choice which this adaptation honors. There are also a number of other characters on the boat including a carpenter, a blacksmith, and a young, Black cabin boy named Pip. Captain Ahab leads this diverse crew on an obsessive quest for revenge on Moby Dick, a giant white sperm whale. On a previous voyage, Ahab's leg was taken by Moby Dick, spurring his quest for revenge. As Ahab pursues Moby Dick across the oceans, the crew of the *Pequod* and passing ships warn the captain of the danger of his quest. These warnings do not calm Ahab's lust for revenge; ultimately, Ahab leads his ship and crew to complete wreckage.

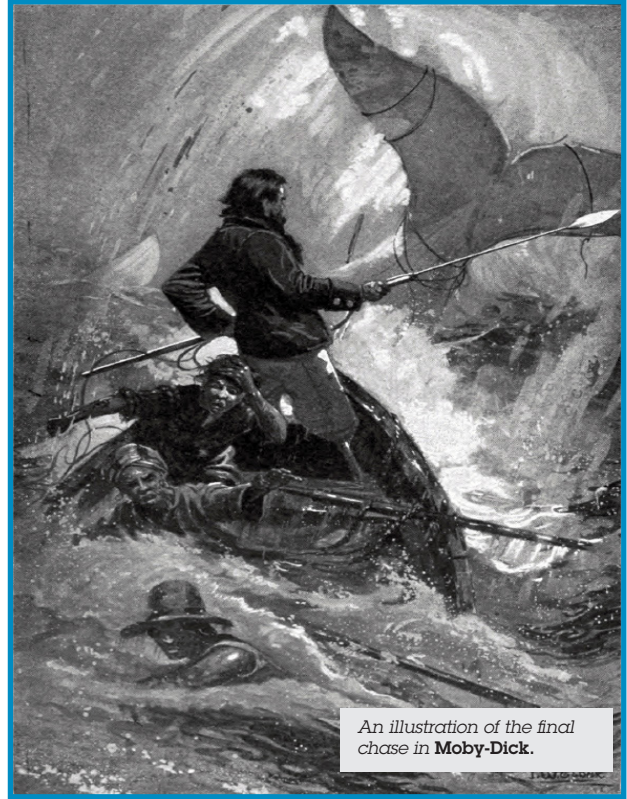


Image: I. W. Tober in Moby Dick - edition: Charles Scribner's Sons, New York [Public domain]

Meet the Crew

*The following list of characters is taken directly from the script of Dave Malloy's **Moby-Dick**.*

Ishmael Non-white male, 20s-30s. Baritone/Tenor. A depressed wanderer; a dork.

Ahab White male, 50s+. Tenor. A fierce and unshakeable Old Testament patriarch; monomaniacal, ruined, obsessed with vengeance. With a glimmer of sadness.

Starbuck Non-white, any gender, 20s-30s. Mezzo. Strict and good. The moral compass of the ship.

Stubb Non-white, any gender, 20s-30s. Mezzo. Goofy and pragmatic, with a mean streak.

Flask Non-white, any gender, 20s-30s. Soprano. Crude and cruel. Lackey.

Queequeg Pacific Islander male, trans and/or queer encouraged, 20s-30s. Tenor. Outlandish and enlightened.

Tashtego Native American male, 20s-30s. Baritone/Tenor. Strong, dry, and a little world-weary. Ecologist.

Daggoo Black male, 20s-30s. Bass. Strong, fun, and a little naive. Hedonist.

Fedallah Black male, 20s-30s. Bass. Smart-aleck.

Pip Black, any gender, early 20s or younger. Soprano. Strange and haunted.

Sailor 1/Elijah/The Blacksmith Non-white, any gender, 20s-30s. Tenor. A Beat poet with a very old soul.

Sailor 2/Shanty Singer/The Carpenter Non-white, any gender, 20s-30s. Mezzo. Rowdy.

Father Mapple/Captain of the Albatross/Captain Boomer of the Bachelor/Captain Gardiner of the Rachel Black female, 40s-60s. Alto. Ancient. Pilot of the living God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- The casting of the show based on race and gender differs from the book. Why might the playwright (the person who wrote the script) have made the choice to steer away from the book's depiction of some of these characters? Why did the playwright keep some characters the same, specifically Anab and the harpooners?
- There is a hierarchy on the boat when it comes to rank and roles. How might that affect the relationships between the various characters? What groupings or pairs do you see?



Whale Songs

A conversation between A.R.T. Executive Producer Diane Borger and ***Moby-Dick*** adaptor and composer Dave Malloy

After *Beowulf*, *Three Pianos*, *Ghost Quartet*, and *Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812*, this will be the fifth show you’ve done with us here at the A.R.T. What drew you to *Moby-Dick*?

More than anything, it was the form of the novel. It’s just an insane, messy novel. The narrator disappears in the middle; some chapters are written as plays with stage directions; there are long digressions into cetology and paintings of whales. The writing is sometimes Biblical and Shakespearean, other times hilarious and downright crude. But when you absorb all that on its own terms, you see Melville playing with the form of the novel, and you see this character dealing with post-traumatic stress in a really interesting way, by delving into the history of whales and whaling and trying to understand everything there is to know. I wanted to embrace all of that. So while we’re not actually doing all 135 chapters of the book, we are doing about forty of them, plus the prologue and epilogue. And the piece is structured in four parts, each with its own theatrical style.

Whale Songs (cont.)

As we've been talking about the production, we've described it as "the iconic American novel mashed up with where we are right now."

We're wrestling with what Melville was saying about America in 1851 and what we're saying about America in 2019. A lot of the topics that Melville was writing about are things we're still talking about 170 years later. So environmental issues are a huge part of this production; Melville devotes a whole chapter to speculating on whether whales will become extinct like the buffalo. Race is a huge part of this production; there is a beautiful chapter in the book called "The Whiteness of the Whale," and race is something Melville touches on throughout, emphasizing the humanity of his non-white characters at a time when the literal humanity of people of color was being questioned. We're looking at whiteness in America and how white supremacy and patriarchy have put us all on this boat which is doomed to sink. We're also really diving into Ishmael and Queequeg's relationship in this adaptation, and making it an overtly romantic relationship—which is hinted at in the novel, but kind of ignored by most adaptations.

You spent a couple weeks on Nantucket this summer. What did you learn?

I got to meet Nathaniel Philbrick, a Melville and Nantucket expert who wrote *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex*. It was such a thrill to talk with him and geek out about the book together; he also wrote *Why Read Moby-Dick?*, which is just a perfect distillation of everything that is incredible about Melville's novel. I would highly recommend that book; our whole cast is reading it. I also got to see a show called *Nantucket: The MusACKall!*—because their airport code is ACK—at a community theater. It was a musical history of Nantucket, and was just absolutely perfect in every way, especially in how small-town America its production aesthetics felt, which was so informative for *Moby-Dick*. One thing we are thinking about for this production is how the design and music all want to feel very American, full of DIY grit and homegrown innovation.

You and Rachel have been working on this project for years. How has the piece evolved over that time?

What's really interesting about this show is that we've been developing it for five or six years, and a lot of that development has happened in public; I did a concert version of Part III at Joe's Pub back in 2014, and we did an amazing concert of excerpts under the blue whale at the Hall of Ocean Life at the Natural History Museum in New York this past summer. Things have changed radically as we've been developing the piece; originally, Ahab was going to be played by a woman and Ishmael was going to be played by five separate actors. And the piece was going to be in seven parts. They were actually going to be seven separate one-hour shows that you could see in any order.

Whale Songs (cont.)

And originally you were going to play Herman Melville—a character you’ve cut from the show.

Yeah, for a long time I wanted to acknowledge my presence in the piece as a white writer trying to tackle these issues of race, highlighting all the privilege, discomfort, and limitations inherent in that, but ultimately it felt like my presence was just taking up too much space. And was taking so much away from Ishmael and Ahab; there was nothing that Melville was doing that Ishmael or Ahab didn’t do better. So now I’ve replaced myself with a white marble bust of Melville, who I’m sure will be a much better actor than me.

What can you tell us about the music in the show?

Like the rest of the production, the music is very American, pulling from gospel, jazz, folk, country, Tin Pan Alley and Broadway, Copland, Glass, Dylan... I tend to be a very eclectic composer, so it’s been such a pleasure to swim in all the diverse musical languages that have been created in America. And of course the history of American music is very tied to race as well, so musical appropriation has become yet another thread in the piece. I’ve also spent the last year listening to a ton of whale sounds, and the body of music that has been composed around those sounds, so there is a bit of that as well—humpback whale wailing and blue whale rumbling and sperm whale clicking.

Interview by A.R.T. Executive Producer Diane Borger.

This article originally appeared in the A.R.T. Winter 2019/2020 Guide.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Dave mentions the messy structure of the novel, and a desire to highlight its still-urgent themes in his adaptation. What are some strategies Dave mentions to help him both authentically capture the depth and breadth of the novel and connect it to America today?
- Based on the plot and themes of the book, do you think it is important to root the music in American musical traditions? Why or why not?
- Why do you think it is important for playwrights and creators to spend time in the places or with the communities that they are writing about?



Director Rachel Chavkin and Puppet Designer and Puppet Director Eric Avery discuss a scene in rehearsal for **Moby-Dick**

Photo by Maria Baranova

Nothing is Ever Just One Thing

On the massive journey of **Moby-Dick** with director Rachel Chavkin

*Tony Award-winning director Rachel Chavkin returns to the A.R.T. following her productions of **Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812, RoosevElvis,** and **Three Pianos**. Here, she shares reflections on epic storytelling and her inspiration for **Moby-Dick** in conversation with A.R.T. Editor & Assistant Dramaturg Robert Duffley.*

Did you have a connection to Melville's novel before this project?

It was my mom's favorite novel. And I remember reading it for the first time as a kid, in a Junior Oxford Illustrated Classics edition. I read the unabridged version for the first time in high school, and I have read it a couple times since.

What made you keep returning?

I mean, each sentence is totally breathtaking. And of course the density of imagery and theme is so thick that each time I read it, the novel means different things to me.

IN PRODUCTION

Nothing is Ever Just One Thing (cont.)

You mentioned on the first day of rehearsal that the form of the novel is idiosyncratic; it's digressive.

It's mad! There's a whole chapter that Melville just decided to write as a play.

How are you thinking about bringing those formal quirks of Melville's writing to life in this production?

At the beginning of our development process, Dave had the idea to capture Melville's eclecticism formally—specifically, Melville's exuberance of form. Melville is so excited about writing, and this show is so excited about theater. The show is told in four parts, and each part is quite stylistically different. We move from a kind of broad storytelling theater in Part I to the whale hunt in Part II, which Dave and I have talked about as a vaudeville. Then Part III is a free-jazz song cycle that tells the story of Pip, who is the youngest character in the book. And Part IV moves through much grittier storytelling into a confrontation of existential despair.

What can you tell us about the audience experience of the piece?

I think the audience's experience is going to be really eclectic. I experience the show as alternately profoundly funny and exuberant (in terms of theatricality and epic messiness), and other parts are devastating. There's a song in Part IV that, since it was written, I haven't been able to listen to without crying.

You mention messiness; in many ways, Melville has written a book about mess—the messiness of whaling, of Ahab's loneliness, of American history. How are you thinking about that messiness in terms of the staging?

There's been a lot written about this in different Melville biographies: in some ways, he was inventing what it means to be an American writer, versus a descendant of British writers living in America. His formal explosiveness, the vastness of the ambition of the novel on an intellectual level, all have helped to define what an American novel could be—and it's not polite. There's a bullishness to the voice that will definitely be expressed in the production, including in Mimi Lien's scenic design, which is ambitious.

Melville was writing this story in 1850, when the country was on the brink of the Civil War. What made you excited as a theatermaker and a storyteller to delve into this story now?

Well, the country is obviously divided again. But also, I'm not convinced it has ever not been. Trump is not new. He's just the most gross, shameless manifestation of a strand of our country that has always been there. In some ways now, we are just sitting with this awfulness much more publicly. And in

Nothing is Ever Just One Thing (cont.)

contrast to our President, who is a frighteningly and almost disappointingly simplistic thug, it's quite extraordinary to be working on this piece and to have a villain who is as complex and sad as Ahab.

When did you start developing the piece?

We first started talking about it in 2013. We presented the first part that Dave wrote—Section III, the Pip section—in a concert in the spring of 2014. So the show was in development long before the 2016 election; it is in no way a reaction to Trump. It's just a terrible alignment.

What can you tell us about the styles of music and the role of music in this show?

This show is not like *Comet* in that the whole show is not musicalized. But there is certainly a lot of music, and, like so much of Dave's compositions, the music is really eclectic. Jazz is a huge part of the score, and I don't think that's coincidental. Jazz is one of the great American art forms, so that feels very fitting for this piece.

We should also mention the puppets. What role will puppetry play in depicting the play's oceanic world?

There's something about puppetry that feels handmade, and kind of messy. In Part I, we use a form of puppetry called a "cranky." I encountered it as an old American art form, but I suspect it goes back much further than this country. It was very clear to us from the beginning that there didn't want to be any video design in the show, because we are really interested in the sense of nineteenth century Americana sitting alongside a twenty-first century sensibility. So the puppets, as handicrafts, are a core part of that. And they're really fun, too.

A.R.T. audiences last saw your work in *RoosevElvis* and *Great Comet*, which are both epic in different ways: they travel, with the audience, through multiple spaces and time periods. Some audience members may also have seen your production of *Hadestown*, which is also a journey through time. What attracts you, as a director, to these multi-era epics?

I find it most interesting when different layers of meaning are layered on top of each other. Nothing is ever just one thing. That, in and of itself, brings an epic quality. I love the sense of a massive journey being taken, because I want art to have those kinds of epic ambitions. But for me, epic doesn't necessarily mean scale of production, so much as the scale of the interior journey, which can be refracted in very large themes.

Nothing is Ever Just One Thing (cont.)

What can you tell us about your creative team on this show?

It's quite a creative team. First, some members of the **Comet** team have reunited, which is a delight: Bradley King, our lighting designer, and scenic designer Mimi Lien. On the flip side, costume designer Brenda Abbandandolo and I have worked together in the theater company the TEAM, and she also does a lot of films; this is our first musical together. Hidenori Nakajo, our sound designer, designed Dave's show *Octet* and knocked it out of the park. And Eric Avery, our puppet designer, worked with Mimi on Taylor Mac's *24-Decade History of Popular Music*. So I was really thrilled to have an opportunity to work with them all on this project. Working with Chanel DaSilva, our choreographer, has also been a delight—one of my favorite first-time collaborations. She's been able to manifest this wild blend of nineteenth century and twenty-first century vocabulary in a way that is absolutely in step with the eclecticism and muscle of Dave's score. And her passion for the mission of using this "Great American Novel" to think about America today has been quite inspiring.

Interview by A.R.T. Editor & Assistant Dramaturg Robert Duffley.

This article originally appeared in the A.R.T. Winter 2019/2020 Guide.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Rachel mentions an interest in dense imagery and the "messiness" of **Moby-Dick**. How does this compare with Dave Malloy's description of the story? What elements of theater can help to show and explore some of this density on stage? What choices could a director or designer make to portray things like a whale the ocean on stage.
- How does Rachel define "epic"? How does this compare with your own understanding of the word? Does this definition apply to other epic works of literature?
- What do you think are some of the challenges that come with developing and staging a show of epic proportions?

American Wood

An interview with **Moby-Dick** scenic designer Mimi Lien

*In her most recent A.R.T. production, scenic designer Mimi Lien transformed the Loeb Drama Center into a Russian supper club for **Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812**. Now, this MacArthur Fellowship recipient and Tony Award-winning artist takes on Herman Melville's American epic. Here, she shares her process for bringing the voyage of the Pequod to life onstage.*



What interested you as a designer in telling this story now?

Moby-Dick is one of the greatest American novels of all time, and I feel like right now, at this moment, we really need to be talking about America, to put it quite bluntly. Dave has written the piece in a way that allows us to grapple with that subject in a multifaceted and multivalent way.

Melville's novel is massive in scale; with its legendary digressions and meditations, *Moby-Dick* seems to orbit madness. How is your design in conversation with the formal structure of the book?

The set has a monolithic quality, but it is also variegated and broken. We're using a single material: wood. But the wood becomes a few different things. The floor swoops up into a back wall and then curves around to become the ceiling; and then there's another piece that forms a canopy over the audience. The structure functions as the inside of a ship, but also as the belly of a whale, and also as an ocean wave about to crash. It's monolithic, but there are cracks and openings that start to evoke the feelings of violence and brokenness present in America today.

How does the structure of the set change over the course of the piece?

I would say that there isn't a huge spatial transformation, but there are a lot of things that make appearances—one might say tricks that happen, things that open up, things that come out of holes. Different things emerge: puppets, whale boats, lights.

American Wood (cont.)

What can you share about how the design involves the audience?

Initially, we threw around a lot of different ideas about how the audience would occupy the space. We wanted everyone to feel enveloped by the environment of the show, but it also felt important to construct a back wall as a way to create epic stage imagery.

The show is divided into four parts, with each part told in a very different stylistic way. In one of the parts—the most contemporary—we do invite some audience members to participate. It's the whaling section of the show, and we're telling the story of how sailors actually harpooned whales, cut them up, brought the blubber on board, and started boiling down the sperm. In a playful and contemporary way, we invite the audience to join some of these mechanical activities: board some whale boats, squeeze some spermaceti, and things like that.

What research have you drawn on in your creative process?

We've cast a wide net, so to speak. I've looked at everything from first-person accounts of whaling ships to nautical diagrams to imagery of the different communities represented by the sailors on the ship. The thrust configuration of the stage, with audience on three sides, was informed by Quaker meeting houses. They create a strong sense of being together in a room, and Melville tells us that many whalers were in fact Quaker.

How do you hope people will respond to the space? What do you hope people take away?

I really hope that people feel like something happened here that has changed us and that has changed the space. I think there's going to be quite a lot of detritus. We start out with this relatively... I won't say clean, but... untrodden space, and I think it will be quite littered by the end of the show. So I hope that there will be a general feeling of "something happened here."

Interview by Joel Zayac, A.R.T. Sr. Graphic Designer and Robert Duffley, A.R.T. Editor & Assistant Dramaturg.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is something that sounds unique about Mimi's design for ***Moby-Dick***?
- Why do you think Mimi is interested in creating a sense of "brokenness" for this particular story?
- How do you think that involving the audience in the show changes the experience for the audience? How might it change the experience for the actors on stage?



Photo: Maria Baranova

Creating Conversations Through Costumes

An interview with ***Moby-Dick*** costume designer Brenda Abbandandolo

What can you tell us about your inspiration for costumes in the show?

The inspiration for the show was incredibly vast. When the members of the creative team first talked about the tone of the piece, we decided to aim for a mash-up of the Civil War era and the present day, with the goal of portraying, with accuracy and authenticity, the many diverse issues that have greatly influenced our country's history between Melville's time and our own. I started by looking at everything from 19th century whaling to Billy Porter and everything in between. We wanted to explore specific moments like the HIV/AIDS crisis, Black Lives Matter, as well as motherhood, and traditional warrior costumes. But we also were dealing with the topic of modern-day appropriation, so I looked to fashion designers like Alexander McQueen, John Galliano, and Martin Margiela for inspiration.

IN PRODUCTION

Creating Conversations Through Costumes (cont.)

In many ways, the show is grappling with living in both the world of the 1850s, when the book was written, and in 2019, when this adaptation is premiering. How do the costumes reflect the spectrum of time periods and cultures that we see in the production?

Moby-Dick feels so ahead of its time. When you read the book, it's shocking to remember it was written starting in 1849. And yet, it's not hard to start imagining the look of the show through modern eyes because we have so many modern references. We needed to root the story and the characters in what was happening in the country in the 1850s since that period sets the tone for what is to come in our country on so many levels. So, the costumes live there, in a combination of periods and moments in American history. From Civil War-era captains played by Dawn L. Troupe, which blend the masculine and feminine, to an ultramodern interpretation of the character Fedallah. They exist all in the same space, as if our stage were the container of American history.

There are some very interesting technical elements in this show. How is the costume design in conversation with Mimi Lien's scenic design?

Mimi's design is so beautiful and so poetic. In many ways, the materials of the set leave a lot of openness and space which allow the costumes to exist holistically with all their inconsistencies, flaws, and beauty together, making a world unto itself.

How do the costumes change over course of the show for each of the characters?

I think every character in any show always has their own journey, and they don't always end up in the same place emotionally or spiritually. Without getting into a long-winded explanation of every character's transformation or lack thereof in *Moby-Dick*, I think it's clearer to see each character's journey as a part of the whole show: from a time and place of individual representation (the 19th century whale ships were a place with a lot of racial diversity), to a more homogenous, utilitarian unit, to a devastated population. It's the arc of a person under horrific circumstances as well as the arc of a nation on an unrelenting mission.

What can you tell us about how costumes serve shows in general? How do they serve this show in particular?

I think costume functions differently in different shows depending on the tone and the direction. Ultimately, they exist to help tell the narrative of the story and the characters, but how that's done can vary greatly. I think this story is

Creating Conversations Through Costumes (cont.)

incredibly layered and vast. The wide range of history helps hit home how long these themes and ideas have been present.

Do you have any pieces in particular that you would like our audiences to be on the lookout for?

No. I always hope the audience forgets that the characters are wearing costumes. Don't get me wrong, a lot of the ideas and costumes were incredibly exciting to dream about and design, but I hope they're enjoyed as a part of the whole.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Based on what you have read, or seen in the play, why do you think Brenda and the creative team decided to draw from so many sources? Are there any common themes you can find in this list of inspirations?
- Based on Brenda's descriptions of the inspirations and story of *Moby-Dick*, how do you imagine the costumes will look? If you look at the cast list on page 6, what would you imagine those characters wearing?



Photo: Maria Baranova

The Puppets of *Moby-Dick*

A conversation with ***Moby-Dick*** Puppet Designer and Puppet Director Eric F. Avery

Hear how Eric Avery approaches designing puppets for this world premiere musical, discussing the intersections of environmentalism with systems of oppression and identity in America.

Watch now at: <https://youtu.be/1iERaKEFm3o>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- When you think of puppets, what initially comes to your mind? How do your initial impressions compare with how puppets will be in this production?
- What are the different emotions that Eric aims to capture through his puppets?
- How do Eric's designs intersect with concepts of identity and environmentalism in this adaptation of ***Moby-Dick***? How does his choice of materials support these themes?



Photo: Maria Baranova

The Choreography of *Moby-Dick*

A conversation with ***Moby-Dick*** choreographer Chanel DaSilva

Hear how Chanel DaSilva leans into a myriad of dance styles to interpret the *Pequod* as a representation of America.

Watch now at: <https://youtu.be/ZZ6pfUCMmol>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- In what ways does the creative team view Ahab's *Pequod* as representative of America?
- What are some of the dance styles that Chanel draws from in her choreography? How does this align with how Rachel Chavkin and Dave Malloy talk about the play?
- "We are all in the belly of the whale" is a lyric from a song in ***Moby-Dick***. How does Chanel quote this line in this video, and what do you think this line means based on the themes she mentions in the video?

Moby-Dick in Context



A bottlenose whale (above) and a sperm whale (below)

Image: Archibald Thorburn [Public domain]

Despite the book's notoriety as one of the best American novels, many audience members may not have read all 135 chapters of *Moby-Dick*. This section provides context about Herman Melville and the reception of *Moby-Dick* when it was first published.

Learn more about how *Moby-Dick* using a timeline of Melville's life (page 22) and read excerpts of critical reviews from the 1850s (page 25). Learn more about the importance of the book through the first chapter of Nathaniel Philbrick's *Why Read Moby-Dick?* (page 29). Next, dive into some core themes of the story via resources collected about whaling practices (page 33) and couple of other articles that provide context about specific themes in the show.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What major events or common themes do you notice in Melville's life, and/or the reviews of the play? How are the themes of the book in dialogue with the current cultural climate in the United States? How do you think these themes will present themselves in the play's design, staging, script, music, etc.?
- Is it important to continue having conversations about these themes today? Why or why not?

A Herman Melville Timeline

In his life, Herman Melville went from a working-class boy, to a widely celebrated and respected author, to a dismissed and unknown customs clerk. The following timeline tracks the course of Melville's life, including various personal and professional events.

AUG 1, 1819 Herman Melville is born to Allan and Maria Gansevoort Melvill (Maria will add the “e” to their name after Allan’s death in 1832) in New York City. Herman is the third of the couple’s eight children.

SEP 18, 1830 Allan Melvill’s import business goes bankrupt. The family is forced to leave New York City and move to Albany in order to escape his many creditors.

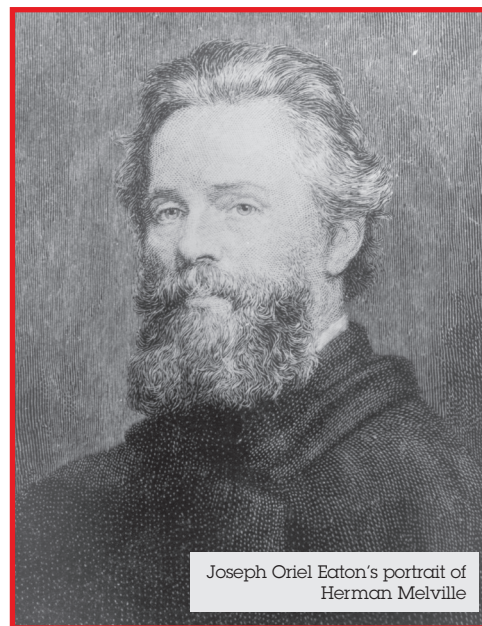
1832 Allan Melvill dies. 13-year-old Herman drops out of school and takes a series of odd jobs in order to support his family.

SEP 18, 1839 Melville’s older brother, Gansevoort, arranges for Herman to be a cabin boy at sea. He makes his first sea voyage with the merchant marine ship *St. Lawrence*.

1840 Melville travels with his friend Eli Fly along the Mississippi River to Illinois, where his uncle has settled, in order to try to find a job. When he is unsuccessful at securing a job, Melville returns to New York City.

JAN 3, 1841 Melville signs up for the whaling ship *Acushnet*, which sets sail from New Bedford, Massachusetts to the South Seas. Melville signs on for what is supposed to be a three-year journey.

JUN 1842 The *Acushnet* anchors in the Marquesas Islands.



After Joseph Oriel Eaton [Public domain]

A Herman Melville Timeline (cont.)

JUL 1842 Melville abandons the *Acushnet* and spends time living among the Typee natives. He leaves the island on another ship bound for Hawaii, and spends most of the next two years at sea.

OCT 3, 1844 Melville returns to New York after his final sea voyage on the frigate *United States*. He begins writing a series of semi-autobiographical novels about his time at sea.

1850 Melville's novel *White Jacket* is published. He struggles with the draft of a new novel about a doomed whaling voyage. On a summer trip to the Berkshire Mountains, he meets writer Nathaniel Hawthorne, who becomes a friend and inspiration. Hawthorne provides Melville with feedback on his manuscript, and encourages him to change his current draft—a detailed account of whaling—into an allegorical novel. Melville purchases a home in the Berkshires named Arrowhead and moves his family there.

1851 Melville's *Moby-Dick* is published. Sales at the time are greatly disappointing. The Melvilles' second son, Stanwix, is born. Melville names him for his grandfather, Peter Gansevoort, who was known as the Hero of Fort Stanwix for his efforts in the Revolutionary War.

AUG 6, 1852 Melville follows *Moby-Dick* with the novel *Pierre*. It is also not received well.

1853 The Melvilles' daughter Elizabeth is born. Disheartened by his reviews as a novelist, Melville tries his hand at short stories. His first piece, "Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" appears in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*. Melville publishes fifteen short pieces in popular magazines over the next three years. Readers are confused by the stories, which are often experimental and metaphysical.

1855 The Melvilles' fourth and final child, a daughter named Frances, is born.

APR 1, 1857 Melville publishes a novel titled *The Confidence Man*. When it fails to garner attention from critics and readers, Melville quits writing as a profession. He takes to the lecture circuit and spends three years giving talks at various educational institutions.

MAY 1860 Melville agrees to sail around Cape Horn with his brother Thomas, the captain of a clipper ship, built to transport cargo across long distances. He makes it to San Francisco before changing his mind about the voyage and returning home in November.

A Herman Melville Timeline (cont.)

1863 Deeply in debt and behind on his mortgage payments, Melville is forced to sell Arrowhead to his brother Allan. He moves with his family back to New York City.

1864 Melville visits the front lines of the Civil War, an experience that leaves a deep impression on him.

1866 Melville takes a job as a customs inspector, where he works for the next twenty years. The job pays four dollars a day. He publishes a collection of over seventy Civil War poems entitled *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*. It is generally ignored by critics, though a few write favorable reviews.

1886 Melville retires from the Customs House after twenty years of employment.

SEP 28, 1891 Herman Melville dies at his home in New York City. He is buried in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx.

1924 Melville's final novel, *Billy Budd, Sailor*, is published, helping to rehabilitate Melville's legacy as a great writer. The finished but unpublished manuscript was found in Melville's desk after his death.

Sources:

Shmoop Editorial Team, "Herman Melville Timeline," *Shmoop*, November 2008.
<https://www.shmoop.com/herman-melville/timeline.html>

D.E.S. Maxwell, "Herman Melville," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, October 2019.
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Herman-Melville>

The Reviews Are In!

Despite its later notoriety, Moby-Dick was not well received when it was initially published. There was a general consensus among critics and readers that this book was unlike the others that Melville had previously written, but the reactions varied between admiration to complete disdain.

Below are excerpts from a number of reviews of Moby-Dick from its first publishing. Consider your own impressions of Moby-Dick when you look at the way each reviewer wrote about the book and about Melville. Some initial questions to consider include:

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What have you heard about *Moby-Dick* before?
- Based on what you have heard about the book, who do you think would have enjoyed *Moby-Dick* when it was first published in 1851?
- Why do you think *Moby-Dick* is considered a great American novel?

To convey an adequate idea of a book of such various merits as that which the author of *Typee* and *Omoo* has here placed before the reading public, is impossible in the scope of a review. High philosophy, liberal feeling, abstruse metaphysics popularly phrased, soaring speculation, a style as many-coloured as the theme, yet always good, and often admirable; fertile fancy, ingenious construction, playful learning, and an unusual power of enchainning the interest, and rising to the verge of the sublime, without overpassing that narrow boundary which plunges the ambitious penman into the ridiculous; all these are possessed by Herman Melville, and exemplified in these volumes.

—*London Morning Advertiser*, October 24, 1851

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

Of all the extraordinary books from the pen of Herman Melville this is out and out the most extraordinary. Who would have looked for philosophy in whales, or for poetry in blubber. Yet few books which professedly deal in metaphysics, or claim

The Reviews Are In! (cont.)

the parentage of the muses, contain as much true philosophy and as much genuine poetry as the tale of the Pequod's whaling expedition ... To give anything like an outline of the narrative woven together from materials seemingly so uncouth, with a power of thought and force of diction suited to the huge dimensions of its subject, is wholly impossible ... [Readers] must be prepared, however, to hear much on board that singularly-tenanted ship which grates upon civilized ears; some heathenish, and worse than heathenish talk is calculated to give even more serious offence. This feature of Herman Melville's new work we cannot but deeply regret. It is due to him to say that he has steered clear of much that was objectionable in some of his former tales; and it is all the greater pity, that he should have defaced his pages by occasional thrusts against revealed religion which add nothing to the interest of his story, and cannot but shock readers accustomed to a reverent treatment of whatever is associated with sacred subjects ... [T]he artist has succeeded in investing objects apparently the most unattractive with an absorbing fascination. The flashes of truth, too, which sparkle on the surface of the foaming sea of thought through which the author pulls his readers in the wake of the whale-ship,—the profound reflections uttered by the actors in the wild watery chase in their own quaint forms of thought and speech,—and the graphic representations of human nature in the startling disguises under which it appears on the deck of the Pequod,—all these things combine to raise *The Whale* far beyond the level of an ordinary work of fiction. It is not a mere tale of adventures, but a whole philosophy of life, that it unfolds.

—*London John Bull*, October 25, 1851

Not only is there an immense amount of reliable information here before us; the *dramatis personae* ... are all vivid sketches done in the author's best style. What they do, and how they look, is brought to one's perception with wondrous elaborateness of detail; and yet this minuteness does not spoil the broad outline of each. It is only when Mr. Melville puts words into the mouths of these living and moving beings, that his cunning fails him, and the illusion passes away ... The rarely imagined character [Ahab] has been grievously spoiled, nay altogether ruined, by a vile overdaubing with a coat of book-learning and mysticism; there is no method in his madness; and we must needs pronounce the chief feature of the volume a perfect failure, and the work itself inartistic. There is nevertheless in it, as we have already hinted, abundant choice reading for those who can skip a page now and then, judiciously ... Mr. Melville has crowded together in a few prefatory pages a large collection of brief and pithy extracts from authors innumerable, such as one might expect as headings for chapters. We do not like the innovation. It is having oil, mustard, vinegar, and pepper served up as a dish, in place of being scientifically administered sauce-wise.

—William Young, *New York Albion*, November 22, 1851

A new work by Herman Melville, entitled *Moby Dick*; or, the Whale, has just been issued by Harper and Brothers, which, in point of richness and variety of incident, originality of conception, and splendor of description, surpasses any of the former productions of this highly successful author ... [T]he author has contrasted a romance, a tragedy, and a natural history, not without numerous gratuitous suggestions on psychology, ethics, and theology. Beneath the whole story, the subtle, imaginative reader may perhaps find a pregnant allegory, intended to illustrate the mystery of human life. Certain it is that the rapid, pointed hints which are often thrown out, with the keenness and velocity of a harpoon, penetrate deep into the heart of things, showing that the genius of the author for moral analysis is scarcely surpassed by his wizard power of description.

—George Ripley, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, December, 1851

Thrice unlucky Herman Melville! ... This is an odd book, professing to be a novel;

The Reviews Are In! (cont.)

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

Mr. Melville never writes naturally. His sentiment is forced, his wit is forced, and his enthusiasm is forced. And in his attempts to display to the utmost extent his powers of 'fine writing,' he has succeeded, we think, beyond his most sanguine expectations. The truth is, Mr. Melville has survived his reputation. If he had been contented with writing one or two books, he might have been famous, but his vanity has destroyed all his chances for immortality, or even of a good name with his own generation. For, in sober truth, Mr. Melville's vanity is immeasurable. He will either be first among the book-making tribe, or he will be nowhere. He will centre all attention upon himself, or he will abandon the field of literature at once. From this morbid self-esteem, coupled with a most unbounded love of notoriety, spring all Mr. Melville's efforts, all his rhetorical contortions, all his declamatory abuse of society, all his inflated sentiment, and all his insinuating licentiousness ... We have no intention of quoting any passages just now from *Moby Dick*. The London journals, we understand, 'have bestowed upon the work many flattering notices,' and we should be loth to combat such high authority. But if there are any of our readers who wish to find examples of bad rhetoric, involved syntax, stilted sentiment and incoherent English, we will take the liberty of recommending to them this precious volume of Mr. Melville's.

-New York United States Magazine and Democratic Review, January, 1852

SOURCE:

Book Marks, "The Original 1851 Reviews of *Moby Dick*," Book Marks, September 2017.

<https://bookmarks.reviews/the-original-1851-reviews-of-moby-dick/>

Discussion Questions can be found on the next page!

The Reviews Are In! (cont.)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What do these various reviews tell you about the reception of *Moby-Dick* when it was first published?
- Do you see any recurring themes, concepts, or ideas in the reviews?
- What were your impressions of the book before reading these reviews? Do any of these reviews reflect your initial impressions of the book, or did anything surprise you about the reviews? Do your impressions or these reviews give you any expectations for the play?

GO EVEN FURTHER

Find reviews of *Moby-Dick* (either the book or its adaptations) from the 20th or 21st centuries. Consider how these reviews are different from those compiled here, including the difference in the language used to describe the story.

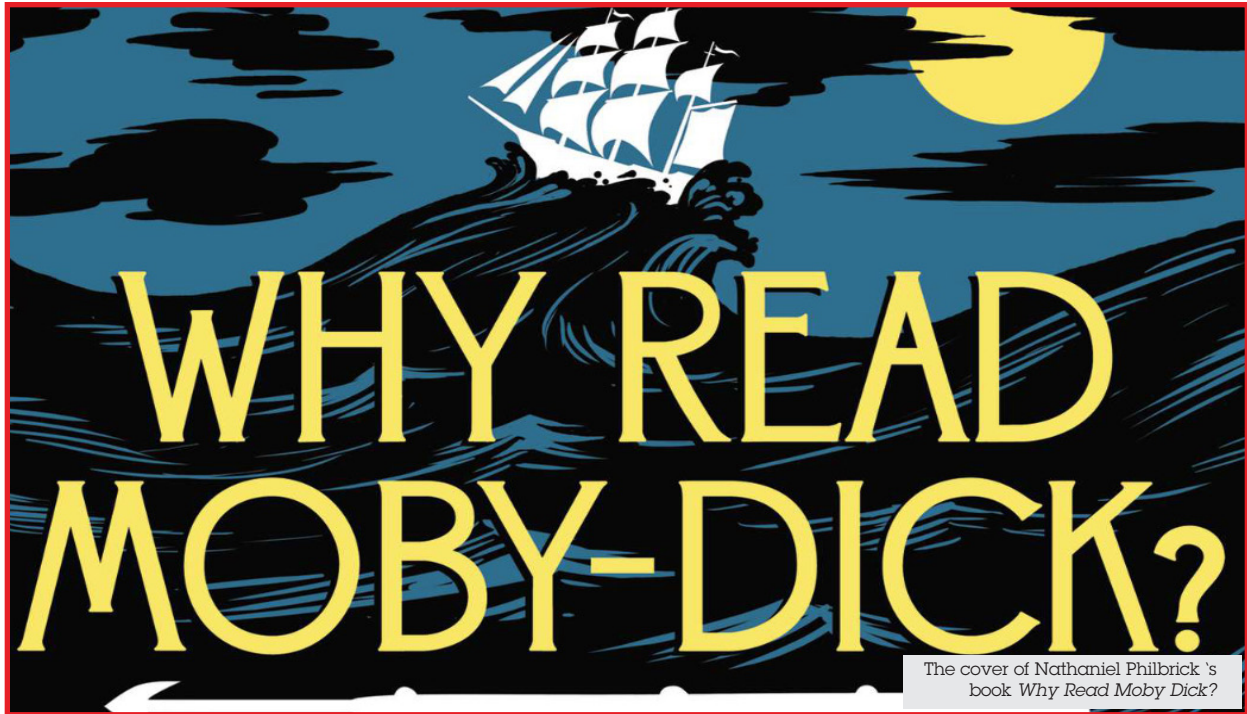


Image: Tarquin Binary [CC BY-SA 2.5]

The Gospels in This Century

From *Why Read Moby-Dick?* by Nathaniel Philbrick

This excerpt of the first chapter of Nathaniel Philbrick's book addresses Herman Melville and his life but also stresses the importance of the book and the questions that it raises.

Early in the afternoon of December 16, 1850, Herman Melville looked at his timepiece. He was in the midst of composing the novel we now know as *Moby-Dick*. At that moment he was writing about how for thousands, even millions of years whales have been filling the atmosphere over the waters of the Pacific with the haze of their sprouts—"sprinkling and mystifying the gardens of the deep." It was then that he decided to record the exact time at which he was writing these words about whale spouts: "fifteen and a quarter minutes past one o'clock P.M. of this sixteenth day of December, A.D. 1850."

When *Moby-Dick* was eventually published in November of the following year, the date in this passage was changed from 1850 to 1851. But that is

The Gospels in This Century (cont.)

no matter. The fact remains that in this tiny chapter, titled “The Fountain” (the 85th in a novel that would eventually extend to 135 chapters), Melville did something outrageous. He pulled back the fictive curtain and inserted a seemingly irrelevant glimpse of himself in the act of the composition. I’ve now read *Moby-Dick* at least a dozen times, and this reference to a specific time and day in December remains my favorite part of the book. Whenever I come upon that sentence, I feel as if I am there, with Melville, as he creates the greatest American novel ever written.

In December 1850, Melville was just thirty-one years old. A few months earlier he’d decided to move his family from New York City to the Berkshires in western Massachusetts, the temporary home of his new literary idol, Nathaniel Hawthorne. Melville was already the father of a baby boy named Malcolm; in October of the following year his wife, Elizabeth, gave birth to a second son, Stanwix.

His literary career had begun in spectacular fashion four years before with *Typee*, a bestseller about his adventures in the South Seas. But Melville quickly learned that success guarantees nothing and in fact turns the future into an endless quest to measure up to the past. As each subsequent book failed to equal *Typee*’s sales, and with his financial responsibilities mounting (his household often included his widowed mother and his sisters), Melville began to worry about the future. “Dollars damn me...,” he confided to Hawthorne. “Though I wrote the Gospels in this century, I should die in the gutter.”

From the second-floor study of the farmhouse he purchased and renovated with loans from his father-in-law and a family friend, he could see nearby Mount Greylock. When the snow blanketed the surrounding fields that winter, Melville claimed to enjoy “a sort of sea-feeling.” But as he worked with an increasing, Ahab-like frenzy on his book about the maimed captain and his pursuit of the White Whale, the omnipresent sea-feeling was anything but a comfort. “My room seems a ship’s cabin,” he wrote to a literary friend, “& at nights when I wake up & hear the wind shrieking, I almost fancy there is too much sail on the house, & I had better go on the roof & rig in the chimney.”

Once seated at his desk each morning, he was literally consumed by his story, sometimes working past four o’clock in the afternoon without pausing to eat. When exhaustion finally forced him to stop, he spent the evening sitting listlessly amid his extended family in what he described as “a sort of mesmeric state.” Not only was he drawing upon his own experiences in the Pacific, he was also immersing himself in scientific treatises and narratives associated with the whale fishery. Most important, his recent and omnivorous reading of Shakespeare, Milton, Virgil, and others meant that the voices of these writers were as fresh and accessible

The Gospels in This Century (cont.)

to him as anything he might read in a newspaper or magazine.

In 1850 the United States was in the midst of pushing its way west across the full three-thousand-mile breadth of the North American continent. Railroads had begun to knit together the interior of the nation into an iron tracery of ceaseless, smoke-belching movement. Steamboats ventured up once-inaccessible rivers. With the winning of the Mexican War in 1848, America's future as a bicoastal nation was sealed. When the word reached the East Coast that gold had been discovered earlier that year in California, thousands upon thousands of prospectors quickly made that future an accomplished fact.

But there was a problem with this juggernaut: a lie festered at the ideological core of the then-thirty states of America. Even though its founders had promised liberty and freedom for all, the southern half of the country was economically dependent on African slavery. Ever since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the issue had been gnawing at the heart of America, and now, after decades of avoidance and evasion, it was becoming clear that the nation was headed for a crisis. With the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, which required that escaped slaves found anywhere in the United States be handed over to the authorities, slavery was no longer just a Southern problem. All Americans, both above and below the Mason-Dixon line, were now legally bound to the institution of slavery. Antagonisms that had lain dormant for decades could no longer be contained, and an eruption of terrible violence appeared inevitable. Despite all its brilliant successes, America was on the verge of a cataclysm.

To be an American writer in 1850 was to be part of a young, still tentative literary tradition. Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper were approaching the ends of their careers, while the poet William Cullen Bryant was one of the most influential literary figures of the time, thanks, in large part, to his position as editor of a leading New York City newspaper. Before his death in 1849, Edgar Allan Poe had pronounced the now-forgotten Southern novelist William Gilmore Simms "immeasurably the best writer of fiction in America." In the meantime, the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was well on his way to becoming the most popular and best-paid author in America.

But it was British writers such as Charles Dickens and Edward Bulwer-Lytton (known primarily today for beginning one of his novels with the immortal phrase "It was a dark and stormy night") who were the most widely read in the United States. Cooper and Irving had managed to support themselves (sometimes just barely) through their writing, but they were very much the exceptions to the rule. The popular essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson relied on his lecture fees to keep body

The Gospels in This Century (cont.)

and soul together, and even Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose *Scarlet Letter* had been selling briskly since its appearance in March of that year, had been employed until just recently as a surveyor at the customs house in Salem, Massachusetts. By purchasing a home in the wilds of western Massachusetts with the intention of supporting himself and his family on the income derived from a novel about, of all things, whaling, Melville was embarking on a quest as audacious and doomed as anything dreamed up by the captain of the *Pequod*.

To write timelessly about the here and now, a writer must approach the present indirectly. The story has to be about more than it at first seems. Shakespeare used the historical sources of his plays as a scaffolding on which to construct detailed portraits of his own age. The interstices between secondhand historical plots and Shakespeare's startlingly original insights into Elizabethan England are what allow his work to speak to us today. Reading Shakespeare, we know what it is like, in any age, to be alive. So it is with *Moby-Dick*, a novel about a whaling voyage to the Pacific that is also about America racing hell-bent toward the Civil War and so much more. Contained in the pages of *Moby-Dick* is nothing less than the genetic code of America: all the promises, problems, conflicts, and ideals that contributed to the outbreak of a revolution in 1775 as well as a civil war in 1861 and continue to drive this country's ever-contentious march into the future. This means that whenever a new crisis grips this country, *Moby-Dick* becomes newly important.

"The Gospels in This Century" from Why Read Moby-Dick by Nathaniel Philbrick, © 2011 by Nathaniel Philbrick. Used by permission of Viking Books, an imprint of Penguin Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How do you think that the success of *Typee* affected Melville's outlook on the success of the rest of his novels?
- Have you ever worked on something that you were consumed by as obsessively as Herman Melville was with *Moby-Dick*? What was it? What was that experience like?
- Why do you think British authors like Charles Dickens and Edward Bulwer-Lytton were more popular in the United States than their American counterparts? What does that tell you about the topics that were of interest to Americans in the mid 1800s?

What is Whaling Now?

*The crew of the Pequod gathered in **Moby-Dick** to hunt whales. Despite the fact that the book was published over 160 years ago, whaling has continued to play a large role in the global economy. Please find a number of articles below that can provide context about the current state of the industry.*

Please be advised that the images in some of the content may be disturbing to some.

Whaling in the 18th and 19th Centuries

This webpage includes information about American whaling in the 1700 and 1800s including advertisements for products made from whale and a chart that depicts whale populations all over the world.

Online resources for the On the Water exhibit at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. https://americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/exhibition/3_7.html

Hunting Whales

In this article, read about the changes caused by Japan recently withdrawing from the International Whaling Commission.

Jason Bittel, "Japan Goes Rogue and Resumes Commercial Whaling," *Natural Resources Defense Council*, July 2019. <https://www.nrdc.org/onearth/japan-goes-rogue-and-resumes-commercial-whaling>

In this article, Charles H. Greene comments on how the current condemnation targeted at Japan for leaving the International Whaling Commission should be re-directed at Americans and Canadians for threatening fishing and shipping industries.

Charles H. Greene, "Japanese Whaling Is Not the Greatest Threat to Whale Conservation," *Scientific American*, August 2019. <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/japanese-whaling-is-not-the-greatest-threat-to-whale-conservation/>

Despite the international ban on whaling, there are a lot of communities around the world that continue to practice the hunt. Read about one of the communities in this article.

Jane J. Lee, "Faroe Island Whaling, a 1000-Year Tradition, Comes Under Renewed Fire," *National Geographic*, September 2014. <https://>

What is Whaling Now? (cont.)

www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/9/140911-faroe-island-pilot-whale-hunt-animals-ocean-science/

Whaling in Massachusetts

One of the powerful figures in the fight to save whales in New England is the Conservation Law Foundation. This article includes an illustrated depiction of the history of right whales in the northeastern United States.

Josh Kramer, "An Illustrated History of North Atlantic Right Whales," *Conservation Law Foundation*, April 2018. <https://www.clf.org/blog/an-illustrated-history-of-north-atlantic-right-whales/>

Why Should We Care About Whales?

This article discusses how whales and elephants may help humans cure cancer, but that is only if we start protecting them and stop killing them.

Doug Johnson, "Elephants and whales could give us the cure for cancer – unless we keep killing them," *Yahoo Finance*, August 2019. <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/elephants-whales-could-us-cure-144523075.html>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Are there recurring themes in any of these articles? How does each author view the relationship between mankind and whales?
- What are our responsibilities towards ocean life as human beings? What are the boundaries between ethically using resources and endangering ecosystems according to these authors? Do you agree with them?
- Based on how the creative team discussed *Moby-Dick* in the first part of this Toolkit, how do you think the production connects with the topics introduced in these articles?

Deconstructing White Privilege

The production of *Moby-Dick* starts a conversation about race relations, including the connections between whiteness and institutions of power in the United States. In this twenty-minute TEDx-style talk, Dr. Robin DiAngelo defines and extrapolates on the ways in which white privilege upholds racism. During his preparation for the show, playwright Dave Malloy listened and read Dr. DiAngelo's work.

As you watch, you're encouraged to identify both concepts that you can relate to and those that you might disagree with in Dr. DiAngelo's talk, in order to create personal connections with the role that whiteness plays in racism. This talk is shared as a starting point for conversations about whiteness and race in productions such as *Moby-Dick*.



Image: RobinDiAngelo.com

To watch the video, visit

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7mzj0cVL0Q&t=349s>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How does Dr. DiAngelo define racism? How does this definition differ from her earlier understanding of race and racism? How does she distinguish racism from personal, explicit bias or intentional acts of hatred?
- What are the six pillars that hold up the ways white people are socialized to think about race in America? How do these pillars reinforce racism? Do you recognize any of the arguments or behaviors Dr. DiAngelo connects to these pillars?
- The casting breakdown for *Moby-Dick* (on page 6) intentionally challenges preconceptions of race and gender. With the content of this article in mind, and envisioning the crew of the *Pequod* as a metaphor for America, why do you think the creative team made these decision to cast only Captain Ahab as a white man?

Understanding Colorblind vs. Color-Conscious Casting

In the theater world, there is an ongoing debate about casting and how we ensure that the people on the stage reflect the rest of society; this production of ***Moby-Dick*** is a part of that larger discussion. The two terms that are often used are **colorblind** and **color-conscious casting**. Below, please find some definitions from professionals in the field.

As seen in the *LA Times* article linked below, “Authenticity in casting: From ‘colorblind’ to ‘color conscious,’ new rules are anything but black and white,” staff writer Jessica Gelt quotes Diep Tran, the associate editor of *American Theatre* magazine, who says that “Color-conscious” means “we’re aware of the historic discrimination in the entertainment industry, and we’re also aware of what it means to put a body of color onstage.” In summary, color-conscious casting means acknowledging the difference races and ethnicities of actors when casting shows.

Colorblind casting — “selecting actors without taking ethnicity into account” — is considered to be the opposite. In the same article, Snehal Desai, artistic director of the Asian theater company **East West Players** in Los Angeles, agrees and says, “the thing about colorblind casting is that it denies the person standing in front of you. It ignores identity, and for people of color, that further alienates us [from the theater world].”

The article, which contains more information about this debate, can be found here: <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-ca-cm-authenticity-in-casting-20170713-htmlstory.html>

Lead students in a discussion. Ask them to think about if they have ever seen a show that engages with either kind of casting. The following discussion questions should be asked of students after they have seen a performance of ***Moby-Dick***.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What kind of casting did you see in ***Moby-Dick***?
- How does what you saw during ***Moby-Dick*** compare to other pieces of theater that you might have seen before? This could include live theater, televised live theater, or reimagined movie musicals.
- This debate primarily lives in the world of race and ethnicity. How do you think these conversations can apply to concepts and representation of gender and gender identity?
- Have students read the article (<https://howlround.com/color-conscious-casting>) from HowlRound Theatre Commons that discusses one director’s experience utilizing color-conscious casting. Once read, ask students to consider how these questions and conversations relate to the production of ***Moby-Dick***.

Educational Activities

Lesson Plan Index

THE AUTHOR AS A CHARACTER

Pages 38-29

In this activity, groups of students will research the author of a classic story or a book they've read in class. Students will then write an imagined scene from the point of view of one of the characters in the book they researched. In this scene, the character will interact with or talk about the author.

*This activity may either precede or follow a viewing of **Moby-Dick**.*

A WHALE OF A DEBATE

Pages 40-41

*In this activity, students will use various research methods to gather information and will then participate in a debate where they are asked analyze, research, and articulate a point of view on a topic related to **Moby-Dick**.*

*The final debate of this activity should follow a viewing of **Moby-Dick**, though students may begin their research phase before seeing the show.*

WHAT IS YOUR WHALE?

Page 42-43

In this activity, students will discuss what the whale represents in the production that they just saw. They will then reflect via written reflection on a "whale hunt," or obsessive ambition that is unattainable and/or harmful to others, in their own lives or communities.

*This activity should follow a viewing of **Moby-Dick**.*

Lesson Plan:

The Author as a Character

OBJECTIVES

In this activity, groups of students will research the author of a classic story or a book they've read in class. Students will then write an imagined scene from the point of view of one of the characters in the book they researched. In this scene, the character will interact with or talk about the author.

*This activity may either precede or follow a viewing of **Moby-Dick**.*

SUGGESTED STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

Writing | Research to Build and Present Knowledge

W.PK-12.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Reading Information Text | Craft and Structure

RI.9-10.6 Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.

Arts Disciplines: Theater | Reading and Writing Scripts

ARTS.T.02.13 [HS] - Using the correct form and structure, collaboratively write an original script or a dramatic adaptation of a literary work.

TIME

Two fifty-minute class periods

MATERIALS

Access to Computers

PROCEDURE

Moby-Dick is a new musical created by Dave Malloy and directed by Rachel Chavkin. It is an adaptation of the classic novel by Herman Melville. A theatrical adaptation is created when one artistic medium, like a novel, is rewritten as a play or musical. When adapting works, the playwright must decide what to include and what to cut from the source material. They may make changes, add new events, cut or add characters, change the time period, or “break the fourth wall.” In theater, the fourth wall is the imaginary wall between the stage and the audience, meaning that the audience and actors agree to pretend that they can't see each other or interact. Sometimes, a play will break the fourth wall and talk to the audience or acknowledge that they are in a play. In the musical ***Moby-Dick***, characters talk directly to a marble bust of the book's author, Herman Melville. In this activity, students will write a scene in which a character of their choice gets the opportunity to talk to the author who wrote them.

1. To start, generate a list of potential texts to use. This could be texts the class has studied this year or well-known books and stories.
2. Students should form groups of 3-4 and choose which text to use. Prompt students to record the following in their groups:

The Author as a Character (cont.)

- Who are the main characters?
 - What happens to them in the story?
 - What are their points of view in the story?
 - How might the various characters feel about what happens in the story?
 - If the characters could talk to the author, what would they say?
3. Groups should then research the author of their text to gather basic biographical information, including any themes or events in the author's life that could be relevant to their text. Groups should aim to find at least three relevant facts about the author's life. Use the following questions as a jumping off point for research:
 - When did the author write this story? Where? At what age?
 - Does the story reflect their real life? Does the author, a member of their family, or a friend share traits with any of the characters?
 - Research whether the author ever talked about the book or story. What were their motivations in writing the text? How did they describe their work?
 - How was their book received at the time? Has this changed since then?
 4. Following the small group research sessions, have students write a 3-5 minute long scene to be performed for their classmates. This scene should include a character or characters from the text interacting with the author, based on the groups' research. The scenes can be adapted from a scene in the original story, or they can be entirely new scenes. Possible prompts for this writing:
 - A monologue that introduces or explains an aspect of the text. For example, Nick Carraway could introduce *The Great Gatsby* by explaining how F. Scott Fitzgerald's life related to the story he told.
 - An argument between characters and the author. For example, Romeo and Juliet stop their death scenes to argue with Shakespeare that they should not have to die in his tragedy.
 - A scene that the author interrupts the action to talk to the characters. For example, Mark Twain could interrupt *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to ask whether they think it's fair that his book has been censored.
 5. Each scene must include the following: a central conflict; a character for each of the group members, each with a distinct point of view on what is happening in the scene; a beginning, middle, and end.
 6. If more ingredients are helpful, also have your students include any of the following: three distinct emotions for each character, a surprise entrance, moment of agreement
 7. Once finalized, students should practice their scenes before performing the pieces in front of the entire group. After each group has performed, lead the group in a mini discussion where you hear one thing that they loved about what they saw and one question that they had after watching the performance.
 8. Once everyone in the class has gone, lead a discussion to reflect on the experience. Some reflection questions are:
 - What was challenging in writing your scenes? What was rewarding?
 - Did writing an interaction with the author change your understanding of a character? How so? Did you discover anything about the characters?
 - Did learning more about an author change your analysis of a text? How so?
 - How do the life experiences of an author impact their writing?
 - Should we research an author when studying their works? Why or why not?
 - Based off of what you experienced in this activity, why would Dave Malloy include interaction with the bust of Herman Melville in *Moby-Dick*?

Lesson Plan:

A Whale of a Debate

OBJECTIVES

*In this activity, students will use various research methods to gather information and will then participate in a debate where they are asked analyze, research, and articulate a point of view on a topic related to **Moby-Dick**.*

*The final debate of this activity should follow a viewing of **Moby-Dick**, though students may begin their research phase before seeing the show.*

SUGGESTED STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

Speaking and Listening | Comprehension and Collaboration

SL.9-10.1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SL.9-10.1.c. Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.

Speaking and Listening | Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas

SL.9-10.4. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, vocabulary, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task

TIME

One fifty-minute class period and homework

MATERIALS

Computers (if desired)

PROCEDURE

1. To start, introduce the concept of a debate to the group. A debate is a formal discussion on a specific topic in which opposing arguments are put forward. While people often say that there is a “winner” or “loser” of a debate, the important takeaway is that there are a variety of ideas and ways of interpreting topics that exist. Explain to students that this activity will challenge them to think creatively, connect their arguments back to the show that they just saw, and work as a team to create a strong argument that they may or may not personally believe.
2. Divide the class into groups with opposing views on a subject related to **Moby-Dick**. Some examples of debate topics could be:
 - Who is the protagonist of the story? Ahab or Ishmael (other characters may also be added to this list).
 - Is Ahab's pursuit of Moby Dick justified?

A Whale of a Debate (cont.)

- Is hunting whales right or wrong?
 - The white whale Moby Dick is a metaphor for... (multiple perspectives possible—allow the class to brainstorm options)
3. Each group should take 10-15 minutes to discuss their initial ideas in support of their argument.
 4. For homework, each student should complete independently research to support their group's argument.
 5. The next time that the group meets is when the debate will take place. Give students 15-20 minutes to connect with their group and share out their research and responses to the whale hunt in the production. Once that time is up, facilitate a debate amongst the two groups. The rules are as follows:
 - Each group has three minutes for an opening statement.
 - Once each group has delivered their opening statement, they will have another two minutes to discuss as a group and create various rebuttals.
 - Each group will have an additional two minutes to deliver their rebuttals.
 - This back and forth may continue to go on for whatever length of time so long as new arguments are being produced by the different sides.
 6. Following the debate, lead the students in reflection. Some potential questions are included below.
 - Have you ever participated in a debate?
 - What about this one was difficult? What about it was easy?
 - Was there anything that the other side brought up that surprised you or caught you off-guard?
 - What was the most interesting point that was made by either side?
 - Why are conversations like this important?

Lesson Plan:

What Is Your Whale?

OBJECTIVES

In this activity, students will discuss what the whale represents in the production that they just saw. They will then reflect via written reflection on a “whale hunt,” or obsessive ambition that is unattainable and/or harmful to others, in their own lives or communities.

*This activity should follow a viewing of **Moby-Dick**.*

SUGGESTED STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

Arts Disciplines: Visual Arts | Methods, Materials, and Techniques

ARTS.VA.01.11 [HS]. Explore a single subject through a series of works, varying the medium or technique.

Arts Disciplines: Visual Arts | Observation, Abstraction, Invention, and Expression

ARTS.VA.03.12 [HS]. Demonstrate the ability to use representation, abstraction, or symbolism to create 2D and 3D artwork that conveys a personal point of view about issues and ideas.

National Core Arts Standards

TH:RE8.1.II.b. Apply concepts from a drama/theatre work for personal realization about cultural perspectives and understanding

TIME

60 minutes

MATERIALS

Pens and pencils
Markers
Colored pencils
Scissors

OPTIONAL MATERIALS

Glue
Magazine clippings

PROCEDURE

After reading the book **Moby-Dick**, people often pose the question, what does the whale represent? Some have proposed that it is a metaphor for America, some say it represents power, and others say that it is just a big whale. In this activity, students will be asked to think critically about their own lives and communities and create a piece of art, visual or written, that answers the question, what is your whale?

1. To start, lead students in a discussion about the whale seen in the production of

What is Your Whale? (cont.)

Moby-Dick. Some preliminary questions can include:

- What did you think the whale represented before you saw the show?
 - How was the whale brought to life in this production of **Moby-Dick**? Did it represent something?
 - What might the “whale” or the concept that everyone is searching for or trying to get be in your community? In the nation? In the world?
2. Ask students to individually think about a “whale,” an idea or concept that feels unreachable and dangerous, yet people keep fighting for it. Students should be encouraged to think of something in their own lives but can also choose a whale that relates to their community, the nation, or even the world.
 3. Once a “whale” has been identified, have students create a piece of work that can be shared with the rest of the class that explains their whale. Students can do so using poetry, prose, collages, drawings, or paintings. Encourage students to think critically about the best way to present their whale and what that might look like when deciding how to present their piece.
 4. Each whale should have the following qualities: a title, an image (could be a drawing, sketch, collage, printed image, etc.), and a written, one-sentence description. Each project should address the following:
 - What is your whale
 - How you feel about the whale
 - How it affects you, your community, and/or your world
 - How do you wish your whale could change
 5. Once the whales have been created, students who feel comfortable doing so should be encouraged to share their whales with the class. This should be done museum-style, with the various whales placed around the room. There should not be any discussion about pieces during this time.
 6. Following the presentation, lead students in a large group reflection. Some questions that might serve as a jumping off point are:
 - Was your whale something that pertained to your life or to a large community? Why did you choose that specific, unattainable, and dangerous goal?
 - What do you think of the pursuit of ambitious goals? What about when the pursuit of these goals could cause someone harm? Are we always aware of the effects our pursuits have on other people? Why or why not?
 - Everyone in the play told Ahab to turn back and to not go after Moby Dick. What are some lessons that we should take away from Ahab’s journey? How can we apply them to our own understanding of unattainable and dangerous goals?
 - Thinking back to the production of **Moby-Dick**, how do you view Ahab in his quest to find Moby Dick?
 - When should one accept that an ambition is too dangerous or unattainable?

Bibliography & Resources

FROM THE CREATOR

Moby-Dick was written over the course of six years; what follows is a list of works that were either directly or tangentially inspirational to this piece.

Text

Kurt Anderson, *Fantasyland*
James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*
Dan Beachy-Quick, *A Whaler's Dictionary*
Jorge Luis Borges, "Herman Melville," "Prologue to Herman Melville's 'Bartleby'"
Ray Bradbury, *Green Shadows, White Whale*
adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*
Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me; We Were Eight Years in Power*
Andrew Delbanco, *Melville: His World and Work*
Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility*
Hubert Dreyfus & Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age*
W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*
Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*
Philip Hoare, *The Whale: In Search of the Giants of the Sea*
N. K. Jemisin, *The Broken Earth* trilogy
Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*
D. H. Lawrence, "Studies in Classic American Literature."
Robert S. Levine, ed., *The New Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*
Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*
Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, Second Norton Critical Edition, ed. Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford; *Typee*; *Pierre*; *Benito Cerino*; *Billy Budd*; etc...
China Mieville, *Railsea*
John Milton, *Paradise Lost*
Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*; "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature"
Mark Niemeyer, ed., *The Divine Magnet—Herman Melville's Letters to Nathaniel Hawthorne*
Tommy Orange, *There There*
Nathaniel Philbrick, *Why Read Moby Dick?; In the Heart of the Sea*
David Rothenberg, *Thousand Mile Song: Whale Music in a Sea of Sound*
Damion Searls, ; or, the Whale
Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*
Jack & Holman Wang, *Cozy Classics: Moby Dick*
Cornell West, *Race Matters*
Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*
Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*

Music/Theater

Laurie Anderson, *Songs and Stories from Moby Dick; Life on a String*
Robert Ashley, *Perfect Lives*

John Cage, "Litany for the Whale"
 Judy Collins, "Farewell to Tarwathie"
 George Crumb, *Vox Balanae*
 Mike Daisey, *Moby Dick*
 Rinde Eckhart, *And God Created Great Whales*
 Bernard Herrman, *Moby Dick* (cantata)
 Alan Hovhaness, *And God Created Great Whales*, Op. 229, No. 1
 Jake Heggie, *Moby-Dick* (opera)
 Robert Longden & Hereward Kaye, *Moby Dick—The Musical! (or, A Whale of a Tale)*
 Roger Payne & Scott McVay, *Songs of the Humpback Whale*
 David Rothenberg, *Whale Music; New Songs of the Humpback Whale*
 Philip Sainton, *Moby Dick* (original motion picture soundtrack)
 Pete Seeger, "Song of the World's Last Whale"
 Toru Takemitsu, *Toward the Sea*
 Orson Welles, *Moby Dick—Rehearsed*
 Paul Winter, *Icarus, Callings, Common Ground*
 Paul Winter & Paul Halley, *Whales Alive*

Film

Moby Dick, all adaptations (Barrymore, Peck, Hurt, Stewart...)
 BBC Earth Documentaries: *Blue Planet*; *Blue Planet II*; *Frozen Planet*; *The Hunt*; *Life*; *Life Story*; *Nature's Great Events*; *Our Planet*; *Planet Earth*; *Planet Earth II*...
Blackfish
The Bounty
Dances with Wolves
Hunters of the South Seas
In the Heart of the Sea
Jaws
Lincoln
The Revenant
Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan; *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home*; *Star Trek: First Contact*
There Will Be Blood
 "Dopey Dick the Pink Whale"

Visual Art

Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Unknown Notebooks*
 Christophe Chaboute, *Moby Dick* (graphic novel)
 Rockwell Kent, *Moby-Dick* (woodcuts)
 Matt Kish, *Moby-Dick in Pictures: One Drawing for Every Page*
Moby Dick, Or, The Card Game

MORE TO WATCH

Experience a traditional whale hunt in northern Alaska. *National Geographic* follows the Inupiat as they wait on the sea ice for a whale. This tradition spans 1,000 years and a successful catch will feed the entire community for the whale. Please be advised that this content may be disturbing to some.

"Experience a Traditional Whale Hunt in Northern Alaska," *National Geographic*, Nov 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIYag5MWhPU>

Listen to Nathaniel Philbrick speak more about his book, *Why Read Moby-Dick?*, and the importance of this story. Philbrick discusses Herman Melville, his world, the unforgettable characters, and what makes this story an American classic.

Jeff Glor and Nathaniel Philbrick, "Author Talk: Nathaniel Philbrick's 'Why Read Moby-Dick?'," CBS News, October 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-wlTHYusRk>

The Conservation Law Foundation partnered with Brian Skerry, a *National Geographic* photojournalist, to discuss the North Atlantic right whale. Watch a short documentary about how these whales could go extinct in our lifetime unless we make a change to start saving them now.

Brian Skerry, "The Whale at Scale: A Short Documentary," *The Conservation Law Foundation*, May 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=trv2MMsIT28>

MORE TO LISTEN TO

Anja Krieger is a freelance journalist based in Berlin, Germany who created a podcast series about plastic, the planet, and the people that inhabit it.

Anja Krieger "The Plastisphere: A Podcast on Plastic Pollution in the Environment," September 2018. <http://anjakrieger.com/plastisphere/>

Allison Randolph Albritton is a Marine Biologist turned Ocean Communicator who strives to use her podcast as a positive voice for the ocean in as many ways as possible.

Allison Randolph Albritton, "Ocean Allison Podcast Series."
<http://allisonrandolph.com/podcast/>

MORE TO READ

While hunting is considered to be the primary reason for the death of whales, pollution has a lot to do with it as well. This article from the Independent discusses how a Sperm whale landed on the shores of Wales with plastic in its stomach.

Maya Oppenheim "Sperm whale washed up on Wales beach had plastic sheeting in stomach," *Independent*, November 2019. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/sperm-whale-wales-beach-plastic-pollution-oceans-a9182261.html>

Between California and Hawaii, there is large patch of garbage, officially known as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. This article discusses how in October of 2019, whales were spotted traveling through this patch.

Hannah Osborne "Whales Spotted Swimming Through Great Pacific Garbage Patch for First Time," *Newsweek*, October 2019. <https://www.newsweek.com/whales-great-pacific-garbage-patch-1468085>

In June of 2018, a whale was found on a beach in Thailand. This article talks about how 17 pounds of plastic was removed from the whale's stomach post mortem. Please be advised that this content may be disturbing to some.

Samantha Raphaelson "In Thailand, 17 Pounds Of Plastic Kills Whale, Highlighting Ocean Pollution," *NPR*, June 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2018/06/06/617213676/in-thailand-17-pounds-of-plastic-kills-whale-highlighting-ocean-pollution>