



Moby-Dick; or, The Whale

by Herman Melville

In a Nutshell

Moby-Dick, [Herman Melville's](#) 1851 novel, tells the story of obsessed Captain Ahab's quest for revenge on the White Whale as observed by a common seaman who identifies himself only as Ishmael. In the past century and a half, this novel has achieved legendary status. *Moby-Dick* is probably second only to *War and Peace* as a cultural byword for a long, difficult book that unnerves even the most gung-ho readers with its web of digressions and literary and cultural references.

When the novel was first published, reviewers and readers alike were, at best, puzzled by its density and, at worst, offended by its religious and sexual allusions. It was the so-called "Melville Revival" of the early twentieth century that placed *Moby-Dick* on every critic's short list of great American novels (or great novels from any culture, for that matter). Even those who've never read a word of *Moby-Dick* often recognize the book's famous first line, "Call me Ishmael," or the plot device of an insane quest for vengeance on an aspect of the natural world.

Moby-Dick has been referenced in popular culture throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, showing up in everything from a [Led Zeppelin](#) song to [The Simpsons](#) to [Star Trek](#). There are many different adaptations of *Moby-Dick* in a variety of genres, most notably a 1956 film starring [Gregory Peck](#) as Captain Ahab and a 1998 TV miniseries with [Patrick Stewart](#) in the same role. Both these adaptations get a bad rap because they can't reproduce the language and structure of Melville's novel. In fact, there's really no substitute for this book, and reading it can make a whole new side of American culture visible.

Why Should I Care?

There are plenty of people in the world who are more than ready to tell you why you should care about *Moby-Dick* - the problem is that we at Shmoop aren't ready to agree with most of them.

Sure, lots of people will tell you that you should read *Moby-Dick* because it's a Great American Novel.
Because it's a Tremendous Achievement in Literature.
The trouble is, being a Significant Book doesn't always equal being a *good read*.
Luckily, however, we find *Moby-Dick* to be both.

But before you can really get into *Moby-Dick*, you're going to have to shrug off some of the stuff you may have been told, or that you might have picked up from all the rumors that are swimming around this book.

Let's do as [Adam](#) and [Jamie](#) do on [Mythbusters](#) and, well, bust two huge myths:

Myth #1: *Moby-Dick* is a long, dense, tedious, boring novel.

The Truth: Well, Shmoop won't lie to you.

It is long, and it can be a difficult read because the vocabulary and syntax are complicated. But it is *not* tedious or boring - not if you're concentrating so that you can get the jokes.

Pretty much every chapter contains some kind of hilarious gag, accompanied by a nudge in the ribs from Melville.

One thing *Moby-Dick* tries to be is [Shakespearean](#), not only in the sense of Majestic Writing, but in the sense of having a lot of sex jokes.

And when Melville's not making raunchy jokes, he's explaining all the ways somebody can get killed on a whaling voyage, or describing all the bizarre substances you can get from different bits of the whale.

What we're saying is that this is not your grandmother's classic novel.

Well, OK, she could have read it because it was around then, but you know what we mean.

Myth #2: You should skip the "whaling chapters" that give (pointless) background detail.

The Truth: This is the silliest piece of advice of them all, because as you'll see when you read our "Classic Plot Analysis" of *Moby-Dick*, this novel is about far more than plot.

We'll tell you the plot right now: Captain Ahab wants revenge on the White Whale that hacked off his leg.

That's it.

But that's also like saying that the point of [The Office](#) is that everyone is trying to get work done in spite of Michael Scott. It's kind of true on a really basic level, but what's great about *The Office* is that it's a show where somebody can just stick a stapler in a bunch of Jell-O, not that Michael hates to do real work.

So the whaling chapters are really where it's at.

Moby-Dick is never more fascinating than when Ishmael is explaining what a "Gam" is or what kind of rope is best for harpoons or what somebody's tattoos mean, because that's when Melville spins metaphors that are crazy good.

Really.

Trust us on this - you won't regret it.