

50 CRITICS DISCUSS

Moby-Dick (1851)

Herman Melville

(1819-1891)

“A seaman in the coach told the story of an old sperm whale which he called a white whale which was known for many years by the whalers as Old Tom & who rushed upon the boats which attacked him & crushed the boats to small chips in his jaws, the men generally escaping by jumping overboard & being picked up. A vessel was fitted out at New Bedford, he said, to take him. And he was finally taken somewhere off Payta head by the Winslow or the Essex.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson
Journal (19 February 1834)

“This renown monster, who had come off victorious in a hundred fights with his pursuers, was an old bull whale, of prodigious size and strength. From the effect of age, or more probably from a freak of nature, as exhibited in the case of the Ethiopian Albino, a singular consequence had resulted--*he was white as wool!*”

J. N. Reynolds
“Mocha Dick; or The White Whale of the Pacific”
The Knickerbocker, New York Monthly Magazine XIII
(May 1839) 377-92

“What a book Melville has written!”

Nathaniel Hawthorne
to publisher Evert A. Duyckinck (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.... 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 to learn as disdainful of learning the craft of an artist.”

Anonymous
The Athenaeum
(London: 25 October 1851) 1112-13

“This volume of *Moby Dick* may be pronounced a most remarkable sea-dish--an intellectual chowder of romance, philosophy, natural history, fine writing, good feelings, bad sayings--but over which, in spite of all uncertainties, and in spite of the author himself, predominates his keen perceptive faculties, exhibited in vivid narration.”

Evert A. Duyckinck
“Melville’s *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*”
New York Literary World 9
(22 November 1851) 403-04

“A new work by Herman Melville, entitled *Moby Dick; or, The Whale*, has just been issued...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. *Moby Dick* is the name of an old White Whale; half fish and half devil; the terror of the Nantucket cruisers; the scourge of the distant oceans; leading an invulnerable, charmed life; the subject of many grim and ghostly traditions. This huge sea monster has a conflict with one Captain Ahab; the veteran Nantucket salt comes off second best; not only

loses a leg in the affray, but receives a twist in the brain; becomes the victim of a deep, cunning monomania; believes himself predestined to take a bloody revenge on his fearful enemy; pursues him with fierce demonic energy of purpose; and at last perishes in the dreadful fight, just as he deems that he has reached the goal of his frantic passion. On this slight framework [!], the author has constructed 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.”

George Ripley
(Transcendental leader of Brook Farm)
Harper's New Monthly Magazine (December 1851)

“The descriptive powers of Mr. Melville are unrivalled... Language in the hands of this master becomes like a magician's wand... His delineation of character is actually Shakespearean--a quality which is even more prominently evinced in *Moby-Dick* than in any of his antecedent efforts.”

William A. Butler
National Intelligencer
(December 1851)

“In all the scenes where the whale is the performer or the sufferer, the delineation and action are highly vivid and exciting. In all other respects, the book is sad stuff, dull and dreary, or ridiculous. Mr. Melville's Quakers are the wretchedest dolts and drivellers, and his Mad Captain, who pursues his personal revenges against the fish who has taken off his leg, at the expense of ship, crew and owners, is a monstrous bore, whom Mr. Melville has no way helped, by enveloping him in a sort of mystery.”

Anonymous
The Southern Quarterly Review 5
(January 1852) 262

“The style is maniacal--mad as a March hare--mowing, gibbering, screaming, like an incurable Bedlamite, reckless of keeper or strait [jacket]... The story itself is a strange, wild, furibund thing--about Captain Ahab's vow of revenge against one Moby Dick. And who is Moby Dick? A fellow of a whale, who has made free with the captain's leg; so that the captain now stumps on ivory, and goes circumnavigating the globe in quest of the old offender, and raves by the hour in a lingo borrowed from Rabelais, Carlyle, Emerson [and others].”

William Harrison Ainsworth
New Monthly Magazine
(London 1853) 307-8

“There is no romance of Hawthorne's that surpasses this whaling-story in witching power, in grasp on the pulse, in almost supernatural strength of description, and in ability to quicken the blood... In this story Melville is as fantastically poetical as Coleridge in the 'Ancient Mariner'... The language fairly shrieks under the intensity of his treatment, and the reader is under an excitement which is hardly controllable. The only wonder is that Melville is so little known and so poorly appreciated.”

Anonymous
The Critic 22 (1893) 232

“One striking peculiarity of the book is its Americanism--a word which needs definition. The theme and style are peculiar to this country. Nowhere but in America could such a theme have been treated in such a style.... It is large in idea, expansive; it has an Elizabethan force and freshness and swing, and is, perhaps, more rich in figures than any style but Emerson's. It has the picturesqueness of the new world, and, above all, a free-flowing humour, which is the distinct *cachet* of American literature.... Melville is a Walt Whitman of prose.”

Archibald MacMechan
“The Best Sea Story Ever Written”
Queen's Quarterly VII (October 1899) 181-97

“[Melville] published, in 1851, his masterpiece, *Moby-Dick, or the White Whale* [sic]. If it were not for its inordinate length, its frequent inartistic heaping up of details, and its obvious imitation of Carlylean tricks of style and construction, this narrative of tremendous power and wide knowledge might be perhaps pronounced the greatest sea story in literature.... In this uneven, but on the whole genuine, work of genius, Melville probably overtaxed himself.... No revival of their author’s fame will justify the republication of these productions of his decline.”

William P. Trent
A History of American Literature 1607-1865
(Appleton 1903) 390-91

“*Moby-Dick*...is generally and with justice regarded as Melville’s finest performance. It is, indeed, taken on the whole, a very noble piece.... Yet it is easy to understand why *Moby-Dick* should never reach the popularity of *Typee* or *Omoo*. In parts it is too obscure. The reader, moreover, is harassed by the frequent interpolation of a transcendental mysticism which often ill-fits the mouths of the rough tarpaulins who are made to deliver their minds of the sublimated fancies which appear to oppress them even more than the brine-hardened food they consume.”

W. Clark Russell
Preface, *Typee*
(London: John Lane 1904) vii-viii

“With the tales of Irving, Cooper and Poe we have considered all the fiction of the period that seems destined to a permanent place in our literature. There were many other romancers, however... And here are the stirring *Typee*, *White Jacket*, *Moby Dick* and other stories of the deep by Herman Melville, of whom a modern sea novelist, Clark Russell, writes enthusiastically: ‘Famous he was; now he is neglected; yet his name and his work will not die. He is a great figure in shadow; but the shadow is not that of oblivion.’ Better known than Melville’s work is a veritable classic of the sea written by R. H. Dana, and called *Two Years before the Mast* (1840).”

William J. Long
American Literature: A Study
(Blaisdell 1913) 247

“Ahab, not Melville, is to blame if the story seems an allegory, which Melville plainly declared it was not [in a very ironic tone]; but it contains, nevertheless, the semblance of a conflict between the ancient and scatheless forces of nature and the ineluctable enmity of man.... Too irregular, too bizarre, perhaps, ever to win the widest suffrage, the immense originality of *Moby Dick* must warrant the claim of its admirers that it belongs with the greatest sea romances in the whole literature of the world.”

Carl Van Doren
Cambridge History of American Literature I
(Macmillan 1917) 322-23

“An amazing masterpiece... The versatility and power of his genius was extraordinary. If he does not eventually rank as a writer of overshadowing accomplishment, it will be owing not to any lack of genius, but to the perversity of his rare and lofty gifts.”

Raymond Weaver
“The Centennial of Herman Melville”
The Nation 109 (2 August 1919) 146

“I hereby declare, being of sane intellect, that since letters began there never was such a book, and that the mind of man is not constructed so as to produce such another; that I put its author with Rabelais, Swift, Shakespeare.”

Anonymous
The Nation [London] 28
(22 January 1921)

“Melville’s autobiographical narratives and the passion of *Mardi* met in *Moby-Dick* to make it a masterpiece. The times were propitious for such an epic. The golden age of the whalers was growing

toward a close, and the native imagination had been roused by tales of many whaling adventures. A minor literature had grown up around the theme, chiefly the records of actual voyages and a few novels...

There had been rumors of a white whale, known to earlier chroniclers as Mocha Dick, which had lived for years as a villain of the deep and which, though it had eventually been conquered, might naturally be chosen as a symbol... Ahab is the Yankee Lucifer.... It is not clear how far Melville meant *Moby-Dick* to be taken as symbolical... [!] The conception of Ahab had its origin, it cannot be doubted, in Melville's own heart. Ahab is created with such passion because Melville was partly, or felt he might have become, another Ahab.... But Melville, exhibiting Ahab's hatred of evil, reveals a profound truth: that men, hating too much, become what they hate. In the end it is Ahab that is evil, not the white whale going about his business in the order of his nature."

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(1921; Macmillan 1968) 88, 94, 96

"The latest biographer [Weaver] does not seem to realize how strong the feeling about Melville has always been in England.... A lady of letters...was glad to see people were reading Melville again, and added: 'I can't tell you how enthusiastic we all were, young and old, at the end of the forties and beginning of the fifties, over *Typee*, *Omoo*, and *Moby-Dick*. There was quite a furore over Melville in those days. All the young people worshipped him'."

J. St. Loe Strachey
The Spectator 128
(6 May 1922) 559-60

"Melville is a very remarkable writer... *Typee* and *Omoo* can be neglected; they are good, plain, vigorous stories of adventure, and in style, construction, and conception they differ materially from the books which followed them. It is with these, or rather with *Moby-Dick* and *Mardi*--for *White Jacket*, though interesting, is on a lower level--that Melville's reputation must stand or fall....

The first thing which must be said of Melville is that he writes the most execrable English.... His second great vice is rant or rhetoric... It raves on for page after page, I almost pitch the book into the waste-paper basket and swear that I will not read another line, however many people vouch for the author's genius. Almost--for Melville is undoubtedly one of those strange geniuses, peculiar to English literature and unintelligible to classicists like the French, who perversely produce masterpieces out of their most glaring vices.

If you care for language, you will be bored and exasperated by Melville in *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick* for some three hundred pages, but if you can stand this for so long, then suddenly something happens: the book--and its very imperfections and corruptions--suffers a sea-change into something rich and strange. The same thing happens once or twice and for brief moments in Mr. Joyce's *Ulysses*, a book which, both in style and conception, continually recalls *Moby-Dick*... I do not know exactly what the symbolism of Captain Ahab or Yillah means, but in each case the book seems to me at a certain moment to be lifted on to a higher plane of fantastic grandeur and poetry." [Virginia Woolf loathed *Ulysses*]

Leonard Woolf
The Nation & The Athenaeum 33
(1 September 1923) 688

"The greatest seer and poet of the sea for me is Melville. His vision is more real than Swinburne's because he doesn't personify the sea, and far sounder than Joseph Conrad's, because Melville doesn't sentimentalize the ocean and the sea's unfortunates... Melville at his best invariably wrote from a sort of dream-self, so that events which he relates as actual fact have indeed a far deeper reference to his own soul...always mystical and symbolical."

D. H. Lawrence
Studies in Classic American Literature
(1923; Viking 1930) 193-99

“Melville’s characteristic faults, his digressions and his delays, are found in *Moby-Dick*, and are hardly less frequent than in most of his books; but they have little power to retard the reader. Even when he suspends the action, in order to discourse upon the technicalities of whaling, the suspension is not fatal; and though the symbolism is prominent, and readers are impatient of symbolism, it is not capable of marring the drama of Ahab and *Moby-Dick*, but rather heightens it.... The height of Melville’s great argument--which is Ahab’s madness in challenging the world for pride--is measured by the simple jolly humour of the English [American] ship... The never-to-be-ended combat depicted by Milton’s Lucifer and Archangels is typified as boldly by Melville’s *Moby-Dick* and Captain Ahab.... Extravagances might well be pardoned in speaking of *Moby-Dick*, but they are not necessary, for there is no other book with which to compare it.”

John Freeman
Herman Melville
(Macmillan 1926) 114-18

“*Moby-Dick* is an easy book, as long as we read it as a yarn or an account of whaling interspersed with snatches of poetry. But as soon as we catch the song in it, it grows difficult and immensely important. Narrowed and hardened into words the spiritual theme of *Moby-Dick* is as follows: a battle against evil conducted too long or in the wrong way. The White Whale is evil, and Captain Ahab is warped by constant pursuit until his knight-errantry turns into revenge.... *Moby-Dick* is full of meanings.”

E. M. Forster
Aspects of the Novel
(Harcourt 1927) 138, 140

“*Moby-Dick* is the story of the eternal Narcissus in man... For three-quarters of a century *Moby-Dick* has suffered at the hands of the superficial critic: it has been condemned because to one man it seemed confused, to another it was not a novel, to a third the characters were not ‘real,’ and to a fourth it was merely a weird, mystical, impossible tale of dubious veracity, an example of Bedlam literature, while to a fifth, it was just a straightforward account of the whaling industry, marred by a crazy captain and an adventitious plot.... (while *Moby-Dick* was in the press, news came of the sinking of the whaler Ann Alexander by the ferocious attack of a whale)...

Moby-Dick stands by itself as completely as the *Divine Comedy* or the *Odyssey* stands by itself.... Mr. Percy Boynton has performed the interesting experiment of transposing a paragraph in *Pierre* into excellent free verse, so strong and subtle are Melville’s rhythms; and one might garner a whole book of verse from *Moby-Dick*.... If occasionally, as with Shakespeare, the thought itself is borne down by the weight of the gold that decorates it, this is only a similar proof of Melville’s immense fecundity of expression.... Melville’s instrumentation is unsurpassed in the writing of the last century: one must go to a Beethoven or a Wagner for an exhibition of similar powers: one will not find it among works of literature.... *Moby-Dick*, then is one of the first great mythologies to be created in the modern world...the best tragic epic of modern times and one of the fine poetic works of all time.... In *Moby-Dick* Melville achieved the deep integrity of that double vision which sees with both eyes--the scientific eye of actuality, and the illumined eye of imagination and dream.”

Lewis Mumford
Herman Melville: A Study of His Life and Vision
(1929; Harcourt 1962) 107, 120-23, 131-2

“As the mysterious Isabel is a danger and a final destruction to the virtuous Pierre (Pierre, who is Melville’s representation of the God-man), so the mysterious white whale in *Moby-Dick* is a danger and an ultimate destruction to Ahab and all his crew (Ahab being the Man-god). Isabel is of the same world-substance (mother-substance) as Moby Dick; the aspect from which they are viewed constituting the difference.... Isabel is no more a symbol of evil than is the white whale. In both these books Melville is dealing with life-values which are beyond good and evil.”

E. L. Grant Watson
“Melville’s *Pierre*”
The New England Quarterly 3
(April 1930) 195-234

“The first encounter of Ishmael with Queequeg is pitched to the key of hilarious comedy, though penetrated by the gruesome and terrible. The comic touch is repeated again and again.... Names like Stubb and Flask were frankly comic... The ship seemed to contain representatives of all those major characters who had figured largely in American comedy. They were Yankees from Ahab down.”

Constance Rourke
American Humor
(Doubleday/Anchor 1931) 155-56

“He has his superb moments. But are those moments not rare and do they wholly repay the labor necessary to reach them? A younger generation, in search of that ‘usable’ American past which Van Wyck Brooks so earnestly and sagaciously demanded long ago, has fastened its flag to his mast.... No, Melville is not even a minor master. His works constitute rather one of the important curiosities of literature.” [This critic has proved to be one of the unimportant curiosities of literature.]

Ludwig Lewisohn
Expression in America
(Harper 1932) 188-89, 93

“Two years after Poe’s death appeared *Moby-Dick* (1851), Herman Melville’s chaotic novel of man adrift at sea and in the universe.... His tale of the crazed Ahab...[is] gigantic against the background of an actual whaling voyage.... Only in our own day has Melville’s genius become evident and so impressive that he is really judged as if a contemporary writer... We may expect a critical reaction from the cult which now proclaims Melville as monumental as Dante and Shakespeare.”

Stanley T. Williams
American Literature
(Lippincott 1933) 90-92

“The symbolism of *Moby Dick* is based on the antithesis of the sea and the land; the land represents the known, the mastered, in human experience; the sea, the half-known, the obscure region of instinct, uncritical feeling, danger, and terror.... It is the home especially of *Moby Dick*, the white whale, the chief symbol and spirit of evil; it is also the home of the great white squid, chaotic and formless, the symbol of chance in life....

Probably no other book exists which so impresses us at once with the vastness of the physical universe and with the vastness of the idea of the universe.... The book is not only a great epic; it is profoundly an American epic... We should establish a working compromise between absolute and worldly truth, if we are not to destroy ourselves. This...is the moral of *Moby Dick*: the need of recognizing not only man’s aspirations, but his limitations.”

Yvor Winters
In Defense of Reason
(Alan Swallow 1937-1947) 200-201, 213, 226

“The one thing that could redeem ‘the wolfish world,’ the Ishmael of *Moby-Dick* found, was sympathy with another human being. Similarly, Pierre, at the crisis when he thinks that divinity and humanity both despise him, feels revived by the touch of Lucy’s unselfishness, a feeling that Melville was able to express with something of the shattering force of Dostoevsky. He gave his fullest presentation of the transforming power of such feeling in the relation between Ishmael and Queequeg. When Ishmael recognized that ‘the man’s a human being just as I am,’ he was freed from the burden of his isolation, his heart was no longer turned against society. That he rediscovered the sense of Christian brotherhood through companionship with a tattooed pagan was the consequence of Melville’s now matured perception of the ironic contradictions between appearance and fact.”

F. O. Matthiessen
American Renaissance
(Oxford 1941-62) 444

“The influence of Shakespeare on Melville was fundamentally a profound and pervasive act of fertilization.... There are numerous and diverse parallels in language, in emotional effect, in situation and

tragic action between *Moby-Dick* on the one hand, and, on the other, *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Timon*.... Shakespeare was satisfied to leave the mysterious background of life to random probings or to inference. Melville could not. He was bound by many diverse considerations--by his inherited and his temperamental Calvinism, by the American pioneer in him as well as the Puritan--to confront the truth as directly and comprehensively as possible. In *Moby-Dick* the mysterious background truth looms in the foreground of palpable facts. It articulates itself in those facts and by so doing it confers upon them something of an apocalyptic scale and intensity foreign to Shakespeare's prevailing naturalism.

In the *Divine Comedy* the vision focuses ultimately on the will of God in his creation. In *Moby-Dick* the vision focuses on the mystery of creation, the chief emblem of which is the terrible White Whale. However, just as in Dante's poem all men are classified as they stand in relation to the will of God, so in *Moby-Dick* the characters are classified in relation to the Whale--according to whether they fear him, worship him, or ignore him. From this view of *Moby-Dick*, it would appear that Melville aimed to strike a balance between Dante and Shakespeare."

William Ellery Sedgwick
The Tragedy of Mind
(Harvard 1944) 84-88, 119-26

"T. E. Lawrence placed *Moby Dick* by the side of *The Possessed* or *War and Peace*. One can, without hesitation, place by its side *Billy Budd*, *Mardi*, *Benito Cereno* and some others. These anguished books, which describe the destruction of man, but in which life is exalted on each page, are inexhaustible sources of strength and pity. We find in them revolt and acceptance, unconquerable and endless love, passion for beauty, language of the highest order, in short, genius."

Albert Camus (1940s)
quoted by Howard P. Vincent
Guide to Herman Melville
(Merrill 1969) 41

"Ishmael is not merely an orphan; he is an exile... He is man, or as we like to think, modern man, cut off from the certainty that was once his inner world. Ishmael no longer has any sure formal belief. All is in doubt, all is in eternal flux, like the sea... He pictures his dilemma in everything he does on board the ship, but never so clearly as when he is shown looking at the sea, searching a meaning to existence... What Melville did through Ishmael, then, was to put man's distinctly modern feeling of 'exile,' of abandonment, directly at the center of his stage. For Ishmael there are no satisfactory conclusions to anything; no final philosophy is ever possible. All that man owns in this world, Ishmael would say, is his insatiable *mind*.... Narcissus was bemused by that image which 'we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans,' and this, says Ishmael when he is most desperate, is all that man ever finds when he searches the waters--a reflection of himself."

Alfred Kazin
Introduction, *Moby-Dick*
(Houghton 1950)

"In general, those critics and reviewers of 1851 and 1852 wrote perceptively and with admiration, who could understand Melville's peculiarly qualified Transcendentalism and the romantic rhetoric of his style, derived largely from the English writers of the seventeenth century (Shakespeare through Milton) and from Carlyle and Emerson among his contemporaries. The objectors at the time of the book's publication were primarily the religious conservatives or those who had a marked preference for the classic simplicity and directness of the eighteenth-century writers....

The flood tide of interest in Melville and of articles and books about him and *Moby-Dick* began rolling in shortly after 1919, the centennial of his birth. One of the most perceptive of the early articles was by E. L. Grant Watson in the *London Mercury*, December 1920. Watson felt that any reader of *Moby-Dick* must be 'left aghast at the courage of one who dares with unflinching perception to follow into the heart of its uttermost ocean that quality which, in our cowardice, we call madness'....

The numerous critical and scholarly articles and books during the past three decades have presented a variety of interpretations of *Moby-Dick*.... Many have been provocative but far-fetched, even fanatical. It is all too true, as Willard Thorp remarked in 1938, that 'the reader can make of *Moby-Dick* pretty much what he pleases.' With some readers, the acceptance of this privilege and possibility has produced grotesque interpretations, which reduce literary art to mere accidental stimulus, without substantive content defined by form, and make of criticism simply the recording of an uncontrolled stream-of-consciousness... The creeds of the readers--whatever their physiological or psychological causes--have determined reactions to Melville's masterpiece no less than aesthetic standards and theories.... Great books are great, not because they directly mirror the reader to himself, but because they present another, a different impression of life."

Luther S. Mansfield & Howard P. Vincent, eds.
Moby-Dick; or, The Whale
(Hendricks House 1952-62) xv, xxi, xxxii-xxxiii

"*Moby-Dick* seems far more coherent than *Mardi*, but its meaning is no less controversial...What is Ahab, and what *is* the Whale? The book has been interpreted as a parable of man's struggle against nature, against 'the accidental malice of the universe,' and even against God. It is clear that to Ahab the Whale symbolizes everything malevolent or intransigent in the world and, on occasion at least, everything that runs counter to the will of Ahab.... It not only has its climax, in Ahab's fatal encounter with the Whale, but when it comes at last, it is one of the most thrilling things in American literature."

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel
(Holt 1952) 66-67, 69

"Melville drives home this neutrality of nature in the chapter on The Whale's mysterious whiteness, where the ambivalence (to man) is marvelously exhibited through countless and ageless instances: the evil white and the beneficent white in man's vision, but always the irresistible white, the dazzling summit of all colors.... *Moby-Dick* is a huge nightmare of ourselves at war with fate and the universe, one which we would do well to contemplate--Americans, particularly, who have yet, in all their scientific plundering and tinkering to learn respect for nature and the cosmos...[Ahab's] motive for revenge is not simple, not merely wicked. His quest for Moby-Dick is in part a metaphysical one, for he is in *revolt against the existence of evil itself*.... Ahab's tragedy (and, on this final level, the book's theme) is, then, his inability to locate and objectify evil in himself, or to accept it and deal with it prudently as part of the entire created world, and so to *grow* despite it and because of it; it is his own fated indenture to evil while he seeks to destroy it... Ahab is no Faustus. He always has a choice....

Part of the extendibility of Melville's theme on this final level, of course, is due to the fact that he was truly prophetic, both in the sense of apprehending an incipient but suppressed conflict and dilemma of his own day (which only Hawthorne among his American contemporaries honestly confronted in his writings), and in the sense that historically the full reckoning with the problem was yet to come--and just such an ill-starred solution was to be attempted by modern man, who has tried philosophically and pragmatically to dismiss the notion of evil."

John Parke
"Seven Moby-Dicks"
The New England Quarterly XXVIII (1955) 319-38

"It is a book about the alienation from life that results from an excessive or neurotic self-dependence.... The book is to offer the alternative of Narcissus. One may, like Ahab, look into the water, or into the profound and ultimately unknowable abyss of nature, and see only one's own image or an ungraspable phantom, a white whale which is only a projection of self. Or like Ishmael or Starbuck, one may see one's own image but in a context of life and reality which is *not* one's self....The symbols are manifold and suggestive; the epic scope is opulent; the rhetoric is full and various; the incidental actions and metaphors are richly absorbing. The meaning is profound."

Richard Chase
The American Novel and Its Tradition
(Doubleday/Anchor 1957) 105, 108, 112

“All these seekers and their defeats illuminate Melville’s view of the quest for the Holy Grail. Melville takes as a central character the individual who makes a philosophical voyage, which is symbolized by a physical journey. The spiritual voyage is a search for the primitivist’s paradisiac world, as presented in *Typee* and only incidentally in the picaresque *Omoo*. Or is it a search for the ideal’s absolute perfection, as presented in *Mardi*? Sometimes it is a search for an ideal past and an absolute identity, as presented in *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*. Characteristically it is a search for ultimate truth and being, a final triumph for man’s cosmic status, as presented in *Moby-Dick*. Occasionally it is a search for the possibility of behavior according to the ideal responses of the human heart, as presented in *Pierre*. And it is also a search for idealistic faith and faith’s confidence, as presented in *The Confidence-Man* and *Clarel*. Despite arbitrary divisions, the books all share each other’s problems. The richest books embrace all the problems.”

Milton R. Stern
The Fine Hammered Steel of Herman Melville
(U Illinois 1957) 9-11, 25-27

“Without question the greatest book which has come out of New England, and one of the very greatest works of prose fiction ever written in any language, it is also the final and perfect final to the Puritan’s desperate three-century-long struggle with the problem of evil.”

Conrad Aiken
The Collected Criticism of Conrad Aiken from 1916 to the Present
(Meridian 1958) 91

“*Moby Dick* is, then, Melville’s great attempt to create order in a universe in which a break-down of the polarity between good and evil is threatened. This threat comes from Ahab, whose hatred of creation is the symptom, or perhaps the consequence, of that democratic disillusionment with the universe... Ishmael represents Melville’s resistance against the temptation to follow Ahab which was so powerful for him; he represents Melville’s hold on the world of reality and of nature.”

Marius Bewley
The Eccentric Design
(Columbia 1959) 206-10

“This celebrated novel...was almost forgotten at the time of the author’s death, but in this century it has come to be regarded as the most eminent American novel.... In addition to the *Macbeth*-like touches in the plot and the *Lear*-like touches in the characterization, Melville borrowed the example of Shakespeare’s rhapsodically metaphorical language, which resulted in *Moby-Dick* in passages of prose poetry unrivaled anywhere in American literature... Although many critics find the Pequod and its crew to be a symbol of the world and its peoples, the major symbols of the novel--Ahab and the White Whale--are too complex to admit of any one interpretation.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

“The tragic power of Ahab is the power of America’s deepest cultural commitment, to the figure of the isolated, self-reliant individual, defining himself against both society and nature. The power of the novel is in the encompassing vision transcending this. What emerges is not a pious orthodoxy of belief and humility, nor yet solely the grandeur of Ahab’s defiance, but a dynamic, unresolved tension between an experienced meaninglessness and the stubborn will to find meaning in experience.”

Howard C. Horsford
“The Design of the Argument in *Moby-Dick*”
Modern Fiction Studies VIII (Autumn 1962) 251

“Although some of the essayists who contribute to this volume have reservations of various kinds about the art of Melville or the quality of his thought, none of them thinks it necessary to defend his greatness. To the literary historian, who perhaps has an eye for cultural ironies, this will seem remarkable, in view of the long time it took Melville to gain even half the recognition he deserved, not to mention the apparently unshakable reputation he now has. He now seems to most readers to be pre-eminent among the American

'classic' writers whose genius for prose fiction flowered before the Civil War, such as James Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Allan Poe, and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

His writings are not so voluminous as those of Cooper, but they are more readable. He has something of Poe's talent for the macabre, but in Melville the macabre is only a part of a larger view of life and seldom becomes obsessive. He is not so graceful a writer as Hawthorne, but his range is greater and his imagination is more powerful and diverse. In *Moby-Dick* we see one of those unique productions into which have been drawn all of its epoch's significant and freshening currents of mind and imagination. Only Melville was able to perform this culminating act of vision in our classic literary period."

Richard Chase, ed., Introduction
Melville: A Collection of Essays
(Prentice-Hall 1962) 1

"Melville reached his full stature in *Moby-Dick*, a powerful allegory of good and evil. By this time, too, his prose style had changed from one of Defoe-like simplicity to one of magnificent rhythms, which, while recalling Sir Thomas Browne's, were Melville's own."

James E. Miller, Jr.
The Literature of the United States I, 3rd ed.
(Scott, Foresman 1963) 137-8

"If we begin with the natural world--the nonhuman environment that bulks so large in the book--we may see it as merely indifferent to men, who read human moral values into it. Or we may see it as an eternal mystery, incomprehensible to men but ordered by God. Or we may view it through Ahab's eyes, as primarily evil because it is incomprehensible, whether or not it is ruled by God. Or we may side with Ishmael, the pantheist, who wants to identify nature with divinity. Or we may combine the visions of Ahab and Ishmael, as Ishmael is always forced to do, into an ambiguous union of natural good and evil, divinity and neutrality, meaning and nothingness.

The sense of nature as a benign mystery, God's world, belongs to the spokesmen of the 'shore,' the normal nineteenth-century American civilization from which the Pequod sets out. Father Mapple before the sailing and the first mate, Starbuck, on the ship are the exponents of religious and social normality. They urge a humility, an acquiescence both in the gifts and in the prohibitions of God, without which the civilization of the land could not exist. These two characters are often regarded as the key to *Moby-Dick*, which thereby becomes a fundamentally Christian book. The entire voyage of Ahab can be interpreted as a blasphemous departure from the 'land' values that ought to rule it even on the ocean. In this sense, Ahab is damned because he diverts his great gifts from their proper service--the service of God through the practical service of his fellow men. He is doubly damned because he knows his duty and willfully flouts it. And he destroys all who follow him, both those who fall victim to his teachings and those, like Starbuck, who demur but are too weak to defy him....

The crew, on the other hand, and especially Daggoo and Tashtego, the towering harpooners, are positively anti-Christian.... All these men of the ocean are governed in one way or another by the unconscious, irrational mind, in contrast to the rational consciousness that formulates the religion and laws of Christian civilization.... The meaning of *Moby-Dick* is bound up with the meaning we find in the entire book to which he gives his name. We may identify him with the blank indifference of nature; with the leviathan that God sent to chastise Jonah; with the 'unconscious understandings' of the crew; with the Devil-God who rules Ahab's world; or with the World Spirit of Ishmael.... Like the story it tells, our reading of this book is a kind of quest."

Charles Feidelson, Jr., ed., Introduction
Moby-Dick; or, The Whale by Herman Melville
(Bobbs-Merrill 1964) xxii-xxv

"There can be no doubt that the white whale symbolizes the deity. A definite effort is made to assimilate the god-images of man and of the world's mythologies to *Moby-Dick*.... Jung has demonstrated

that the various representations of the god-image are expressions of the central archetype of the psyche, what he terms the Self. We must thus conclude that *Moby-Dick* is a symbol of the Self.

One of the features of the phenomenology of the Self is that it is a paradoxical union of opposites. This theme appears in the discussion of the whale's vision. It is stated that the eyes of a whale are located in the sides of his head, and hence they look in opposite directions.... The whale can relate to opposites simultaneously and thus transcend or reconcile them. This is one of the features of the Self which distinguishes it most clearly from that lesser center of personality, the conscious ego. Consciousness by its very nature exists by the separation of opposites by acquiring unilateral vision--it incorporates both sides of a pair of opposites in the total view and hence conveys wholeness."

Edward F. Edinger
Melville's 'Moby-Dick': A Jungian Commentary
(New Directions 1975-78) 77-79

"At the book's climax...*Moby-Dick* represents the utter blank horror of the universe if Godless, a horror so awesome as to excite worship. Melville has been described as a mystic, but to me he has nothing of mysticism such as might be ascribed to Wordsworth or D. H. Lawrence. Melville is a rational man who wants God to exist."

John Updike
Lecture, Rochester New York Public Library (23 October 1981)
reprinted in *Hugging the Shore* (Vintage 1984) 97-98

"*Moby-Dick* was usually placed in the popular adventure camp by both positive and negative nineteenth-century reviewers... *Moby-Dick* is the literary culmination of the radical egalitarianism that had its roots in Jacksonian democracy... Melville's difficulty was one that Whitman would experience with *Leaves of Grass*: the fusion of variegated American themes produced a new kind of literary text that could not be comprehended by the very culture that nurtured it.... Radical-democrat humor lies behind the biting subversive tone of *Moby-Dick* and behind the strongly egalitarian characterization of Queequeg.... Surveying the comic elements of *Moby-Dick*, we can say that this is the *only* American literary work of the antebellum period that incorporates all popular humorous idioms of the day."

David S. Reynolds
Beneath the American Renaissance
(Harvard 1989) 291, 541, 549

"Ahab may be crazy to assign evil intentions to a dumb brute, but the pursuit of *Moby-Dick* can't help being a hunt for sense. A whaling expedition is inevitably an adventure in reading; the whale is a primary text of nature itself.... It is as if the great American novel had constantly to be measuring itself against the highest achievements of other cultures, and in *Moby-Dick* this means testing the American book's capacity to appropriate a vast field of cultural reference. Melville's splendidly arrogant claim is that almost everything in world culture might be made to serve his subject....

It is not merely that *Moby-Dick* is worthy of being compared to either *King Lear* or *Oedipus Rex*. Instead it must be compared to both at the same time; only an encyclopedic range of cultural reference can do justice to Melville's mighty theme. His book reenacts several biblical dramas (Ahab, Ishmael, Ezekiel, Rachel, and others), the Greek tragedies of fatality, and Lear's tragic intimacy with nature and madness. *Moby-Dick* is therefore not only as great as any one of these references; in needing them all to explain itself, it also proposes to surpass them all. Categorical erudition in *Moby-Dick* is only the first step in an enterprise of cannibalistic encyclopedism. Like its monster-hero, Melville's novel opens its jaws to devour all other representations from Lear's Fool to Vishnoo the Hindu god."

Leo Bersani
The Culture of Redemption
(Harvard 1990)

"*Moby-Dick* was indebted to a myriad sources, many of which Melville used word for word, including an account of the sinking of the whaleship Essex by a whale in 1820. Captain Pollard and other sailors aboard the Essex survived their long ordeal at sea by resorting to cannibalism. Years later a relative of one

of the Essex crew members approached Captain Pollard and asked if he did not remember the man. 'Remember him!' laughed the old salt. 'Hell, son, I et him!'... *Moby-Dick*, despite some good reviews, was a commercial failure. Altogether only 3,797 copies were sold in Melville's lifetime. After the first year an average of 23 books were sold annually."

Robert Hendrickson
American Literary Anecdotes
(Penguin 1990) 155-56

Michael Hollister (2015)