

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## HERMAN MELVILLE

(1819 – 1891)



### Works

*Typee, A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846)  
*Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas* (1847)  
*Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (1851)  
*Bartleby the Scrivener* (1853)  
*Benito Cereno* (1855)  
*The Confidence Man: His Masquerade* (1857)  
*John Marr and Other Sailors* (1888) (poetry)

### Biography

Herman Melville was born in New York City to a successful businessman who imported French dry goods. He grew up in New York City and also in Albany, where his father relocated after financial setbacks. Melville attended the Albany Academy, and other schools. When his father died, Herman lost all possibilities of attending a prestigious college or continuing the tradition of his illustrious family. Not able to continue his studies in the university, Melville began to study on his own. To survive, he became a schoolteacher. After his employer would not pay him, he registered to work on a merchant ship. Melville's experiences on merchant and whaling ships were extensive, and he visited a large number of locations, including French Polynesia (the Marquesas, Tahiti) and Hawaii, where he lived for some time. Upon returning to New York, Melville lived in Troy, where he wrote his first novel, *Typee*, a romanticized account of his voyages in Polynesia. It was a best-seller, and Melville wrote *Omoo* as a sequel. Many of his other works, however, were a financial failure. Melville's most productive years were between 1847 and 1866. After that time, he did not write, except for an unfinished manuscript, *Billy Budd*, and a number of collections of poems. Melville later held low-level government jobs, and wrote poems instead of novels. His wife was an excellent financial administrator, and so they were able to raise their children and to live comfortably. Melville died in New York City of cardiac arrest. During his lifetime, Melville was considered a mildly successful writer of entertaining travelogues. His classics, *Moby-Dick*, *Benito Cereno*, *The Confidence-Man*, and *Bartleby the Scrivener*, were out of print and forgotten. However, in the twentieth century, both psychological and postmodernist readings of his works elevated him to the status of a major American writer.

### Accomplishments as a Writer

**Complex Emotional Range** When readers think of *Benito Cereno*, *Moby-Dick*, or *The Confidence Man*, they are likely to think of revenge epics, mutinies, and hunters of whales and of men. However, reading Melville often results in delighted laughter, often at the sheer delight of seeing how comical it can be to confront one's own preconceptions. Also, the sudden shift from exalted panegyrics to low comedy (a la Falstaff or vaudeville) is surprising and entertaining as well. For example, *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, simply refuses to do the work of a scrivener, which is to be a scribe and write copies of legal documents. His polite yet deadpan refusal to do his work seems perversely funny in the face of his actual job, which was grindingly monotonous, but which gave no quarter to shirkers. In *Moby Dick*, the scene where Ishmael finds he must share his bed with a tattooed, tomahawk-wielding cannibal harpooner (Queequeg) who has spent all day trying to sell his last human head in the streets of New Bedford is delightfully comical. Even more satisfying is finding that Ishmael and Queequeg develop a deep friendship. The foundation of Melville's humor is an intimate understanding of how prejudices and fears manifest themselves in the mind.

**Religious Skepticism** Despite living in an era marked by Christian Protestant revivals and a multiplicity of Christian denominations, Melville developed a profound dislike of the Christian religion. He did not like proselytizing missionaries, or their impact on the individuals and the societies they converted. Melville's dislike of Christianity stemmed from his experiences in Hawaii where he witnessed and commented on the way that missionaries had deracinated the Polynesians and reduced them to beggary and servitude. In *Typee*, and other works, Melville often comments on the refined, compassionate attitudes of the Polynesian cannibals, contrasting them with "the white civilized man .. the most ferocious animal on the face of the earth" (*Typee*).

**Formal Innovation** Melville was stylistically and formally very innovative, which is to say that the form of his novels and short stories were unusual. His sentences have a loose structure and often contain embedded paradoxes and juxtapositions, which give them a multiplicity of interpretative possibilities. In terms of the formal innovation of the overall structure, Melville developed a form of the novel that had not been created before. In his novels, the chapters can be very uneven in length and content. They can consist of a list or a catalogue. Melville intersperses lists, tall tales, lawyers' briefs, fragments, sermons, puns, comic scenes and dialogues, dialogue with broad dialects, and epic battle scenes. All the different types of chapters are juxtaposed in ways that give rise to free associations, but there is no evident pattern in their distribution. *Moby Dick* is from the waters near Japan, which was considered to be almost diabolically dangerous, due to the Japanese isolationism, and the rumor that any Christians who shipwrecked there would be captured, forced to surrender their Christian icons, trample them underfoot, and then endure days of torture.

**The Novel as Epistemological Exploration** Readers who look at Melville's contemporaries often think he is a transcendentalist like Emerson, Thoreau, or Whitman. While Melville did write about the expansiveness of nature and the ability of human nature to merge or fuse with Heavens and Earth, for Melville, there is always a deep skepticism. While he clearly understands the influence of Eastern and Non-Western cultures and traditions, he stands back, expressing his doubt about transcendence is actually possible, in terms of gaining divine knowledge or inspired talents or gifts. Instead, Melville argues that people are adaptable (as in the case of Queequeg), but they will never ever achieve 100% transformation. Instead, they will be always somewhere on the journey into another's belief system, episteme (knowledge), or self (ontological determinism). In fact, he views American Transcendentalism as simply a veiled missionary endeavor, appropriating cultural accomplishments and ultimately enslaving the people they have contact with.

**Anti-Transcendentalism** Melville's writing was contemporaneous with the transcendentalists. However, self-reliance and the Oversoul, which play such a prominent role in Emerson are subverted in *Moby-Dick*. *Moby Dick*, far from an enlightening, uplifting force, as found in Emerson, is a rageful tempest of terrible materiality. *Moby Dick* is a tempest that disorders in that way of Shakespeare in *Twelfth Night*, *The Tempest*, and *King Lear*. But, it also disorders in a more locally material way: it bites off Captain Ahab's leg at the knee. *Moby Dick* is a raw, chthonic counterpart to American positivism. It is also a proactive Shiva or Kali, destroying and preemptively disrupting all potential disrupters.