

Herman Melville

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Herman Melville



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Photograph of Herman Melville

Born: August 1, 1819
New York City, New York, United States

Died: September 28, 1891 (aged 72)
New York City, New York

Occupation: novelist, short story writer, teacher, sailor, lecturer, poet

Nationality: American

Genres: travelogue, Captivity narrative, Sea story, Gothic Romanticism, Allegory, Tall tale

Literary movement: Romanticism, Dark Romanticism, and Skepticism; precursor to Modernism, precursor to absurdism and existentialism

Influences: Shakespeare, Milton, The Bible, C. B. Brown, Montaigne, Camoens, Dana, Hawthorne, Thomas Browne, Emerson, Thoreau, Carlyle, Irving, Cooper

Influenced: Thomas Mann, E. M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence, Camus, Jean-Pierre Melville, Thomas Pynchon, Cormac McCarthy

Herman Melville (August 1, 1819 – September 28, 1891) was an American novelist, short story writer, essayist, and poet. His earliest novels were bestsellers, but his popularity declined precipitously only a few years later. By the time of his death he had been almost completely forgotten, but his longest novel, *Moby-Dick* — largely considered a failure during his lifetime, and most

responsible for Melville's fall from favor with the reading public — was rediscovered in the 20th century as one of the chief literary masterpieces of both American and world literature.

Atlantic Monthly's December 2006 list of "The 100 Most Influential Americans of All Time" ranked Melville at #100. The panel of historians who compiled the list called him "America's Shakespeare."

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Life

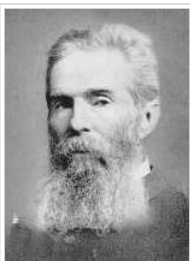
Herman Melville was born in New York City on August 1, 1819, as the third child of Allan and Maria Gansevoort Melvill. (After Allan died, Maria added an "e" to the surname.) Part of a well-established if colorful Boston family, Melville's father spent a good deal of time abroad doing business deals as an importer of French dry goods and a commission merchant. His paternal grandfather, Major Thomas Melvill, an honored survivor of the Boston Tea Party who refused to change the style of his clothing or manners to fit the times, was depicted in Oliver Wendell Holmes's poem "The Last Leaf". Herman visited him often in Boston, and his father turned to him in his frequent times of financial need. The maternal side of Melville's family was Hudson Valley Dutch. His maternal grandfather was General Peter Gansevoort, a hero of the battle of Saratoga; in his gold-laced uniform, the general sat for a portrait

painted by Gilbert Stuart. The portrait appeared in Melville's later novel, *Pierre*, for Melville wrote out of his familial as well as his nautical background. Like the titular character in *Pierre*, Melville found satisfaction in his "double revolutionary descent."

The Melvills lived comfortably in New York. Allan Melvill had his children baptized in the Dutch Reformed Church and sent his sons to the New York Male School (Columbia Preparatory School). Overextended financially and emotionally unstable, Allan tried to recover from his setbacks by moving his family to Albany in 1830 and going into the fur business. The new venture ended in disastrous failure, and in 1832 Allan Melvill died of a sudden illness that included mental collapse, leaving his family in poverty. Although Maria had well-off kin and moved her family to her brother's farm, her family largely treated her and her children harshly for Maria's making such a poor choice of husband.[1]

Herman Melville's roving disposition and a desire to support himself independently of family assistance led him to seek work as a surveyor on the Erie Canal. This effort failed, and his brother helped him get a job as a cabin boy in a New York

ship bound for Liverpool. He made the voyage, visited London, and returned on the same ship. *Redburn: His First Voyage* (1849) is partly based on his experiences of this journey.



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The succeeding three years (1837 to 1840) were mostly occupied with school-teaching. Near the end of 1840 he once again decided to sign ship's articles; on New Year's Day, 1841, he sailed from Fairhaven, Massachusetts on the whaler *Acushnet*, which was bound for

the Pacific Ocean. The vessel sailed around Cape Horn and traveled to the South Pacific. Melville left very little direct information about the events of this 18 months' cruise, although his whaling romance, *Moby-Dick; or, the White Whale*, probably gives many pictures of life on board the *Acushnet*. Melville decided to abandon the vessel on reaching the Marquesas Islands. He lived

among the natives of the island for several weeks and the narratives of *Typee* and its sequel, *Omoo*, tell this tale. After a sojourn to the Society Islands, Melville shipped for Honolulu. He remained there four months, working as a clerk. He joined the crew of the American frigate *United States*, which, after stopping on the way at a Peruvian port, reached Boston in October of 1844. He would eventually experience overnight success as a writer and adventurer with the 1846 publication of *Typee*. For the next four years, he would have other successes, but none would be on the order of his very first one. *Omoo* (the sequel to *Typee*), *Mardi* (a disappointment for readers who wanted another rollicking and exotic sea yarn), *Redburn*, and *White-Jacket* had no problem finding publishers and were first serialized before being printed as books.

Melville married Elizabeth Shaw (daughter of noted Massachusetts jurist Lemuel Shaw) on August 4, 1847. The Melvilles resided in New York City, where he became associated with New York University as an instructor.[2] In 1850 they purchased Arrowhead, a farm house in Pittsfield, Massachusetts that is today a museum. Here Melville remained for thirteen years, occupied with his writing and managing his farm. There he

befriended Nathaniel Hawthorne, who lived in nearby Lenox. He wrote *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* there (dedicating *Moby-Dick* to Hawthorne); however, these works did not achieve the popular and critical success of his earlier books. Following scathing reviews of *Pierre* by critics, publishers became wary of Melville's work. His publisher, Harper & Brothers, rejected his next manuscript, *The Isle of the Cross*, which has been lost.

For financial reasons, Melville was persuaded while in Pittsfield to enter the lucrative lecture field. From 1857 to 1860, he spoke at lyceums, chiefly on travel in the South Seas. Turning to poetry, he composed a collection of poems that failed to interest a publisher. In 1863, he and his wife resettled, with their four children, in New York City. After the end of the Civil War, he published "Battle-Pieces" (1866), a collection of over seventy poems that was generally panned by critics. His professional writing career was at an end and his marriage was dissolving when in 1867 his oldest son, Malcolm, committed suicide. Pulling his life together, he used his influence to obtain a position of customs inspector for the City of New York (then a lucrative and very coveted appointment, though not for a man of Melville's temperament or ambitions), and held the post for

19 years. (The customs house was ironically on Gansevoort St., which was named after his mother's prosperous family.) In 1876 he found a publisher for a limited edition of the massive epic poem, "Clarel," but his uncle Peter Gansevoort had to pay for its publication. Two volumes of poetry followed: John Marr (1888) and Timoleon (1891).

After an illness that lasted several months, Melville died at his home in New York City early on the morning of September 28, 1891, age 72. His *New York Times* obituary called him "*Henry Melville*." He was interred in the Woodlawn Cemetery in The Bronx, New York.

In his later life, his works were no longer popular with a broad audience because of their increasingly philosophical, political and experimental tendencies. His novella *Billy Budd, Sailor* an unpublished manuscript at the time of his death, was published in 1924 and later turned into an opera by Benjamin Britten, a play, and a film by Peter Ustinov.

In *Herman Melville's Religious Journey*, Walter Donald Kring detailed his discovery of letters indicating that Melville had been a member of the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City.

individual novels.)

Moby-Dick has become Melville's most famous work and is often considered one of the greatest literary works of all time. It was dedicated to Melville's friend Nathaniel Hawthorne. It did not, however, make Melville rich. The book never sold its initial printing of 3,000 copies in his lifetime, and total earnings from the American edition amounted to just \$556.37 from his publisher, Harper & Brothers. Melville also wrote *Billy Budd*, *White-Jacket*, *Typee*, *Omoo*, *Pierre*, *The Confidence-Man* and many short stories and works of various genres.

Melville is less well known as a poet and did not publish poetry until late in life. After the Civil War, he published *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, which did not sell well; of the Harper & Bros. printing of 1200 copies, only 525 had been sold ten years later.^[1] But again tending to outrun the tastes of his readers, Melville's epic length verse-narrative *Clarel*, about a student's pilgrimage to the Holy Land, was also quite obscure, even in his own time. This may be the longest single poem in American literature. The poem, published in 1876, had an initial printing of only 350 copies. The critic Lewis Mumford found a copy of the poem in

the New York Public Library in 1925 "with its pages uncut". In other words, it had sat there unread for 50 years.

His poetry is not as highly critically esteemed as his fiction, although some critics place him as the first modernist poet in the United States.

The Melville Revival

After the success of travelogues based on voyages to the South Seas and stories based on misadventures in the merchant marine and navy, Melville's popularity declined dramatically. In the later years of his life and during the years after his death he was recognized, if at all, as only a minor figure in American literature. However, a confluence of publishing events in the 1920s brought about a reassessment now commonly called the Melville Revival. The two books generally considered most important to the Revival were both brought forth by Raymond Weaver: his 1921 biography *Herman Melville: Man, Mariner and Mystic* and his 1924 version of Melville's last great but never quite finished or properly organized work, *Billy Budd*, which Melville's granddaughter gave to Weaver when he visited her

for research on the biography. The other works that helped fan the Revival flames were Carl Van Doren's 1921 *The American Novel*, D. H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), and Lewis Mumford's 1929 biography, *Herman Melville: A Study of His Life and Work*.

Criticism and reputation in the wake of the Revival

The Revival spurred an earnest and contentious first wave of Melville criticism. Much of it centered on *Billy Budd* and *Moby-Dick*; much of his other work was shunted to the side because it was deemed too lacking in artistic merit (e.g., the poetry); too strange or obscure (e.g., *Pierre* and *The Confidence-Man*); too minor, especially since Melville viewed it that way (e.g., *Redburn* and *Israel Potter*); or some combination thereof.

Given its recent discovery and printing and thus its "true" novelty, *Billy Budd* was the text that most critics initially pounced on. Criticism largely fell into two camps, the "resignationists" (a.k.a. the "literalists") and the "ironists." The resignationists believed that *Billy Budd* was a fairly straightforward testament of Melville's resignation

to his fate as an author and human being, whereas the ironists thought the work provided ample evidence that Melville meant the work to be taken as irony and thus a cry against injustice and the very opposite of resignation. This dispute over Melville's fundamental attitude—was he a conservative or a radical?—would color the arguments for the rest of the first wave.

Other movements found in Melville a worthy precursor. For instance, many Existentialists and Absurdist saw "Bartleby the Scrivener" as a prescient exploration and embodiment of their concerns.

Many of the disputants in the critical battles over some of Melville's more provocative works ultimately realized that many of their questions and critical speculations would not be answered until more texts were discovered, further definitive texts were established, and more facts of Melville's life were unearthed. Biographical needs brought about such works as Jay Leyda's *The Melville Log: A Documentary Life of Herman Melville, 1819-1891* (1951), Leon Howard's *Herman Melville: A Biography* (1951) and, most notably perhaps, the winner of the 1950 National Book Award for non-fiction, *Herman Melville* by Newton Arvin. The

"correct version" of *Billy Budd*, however, was always in dispute; several different editors brought out their own versions in the decades after Weaver's appeared. It was not until Harrison Hayford and Merton Sealts, Jr., published a definitive text of *Billy Budd* in 1962 that scholars were generally agreed on the content and thrust of Melville's "final statement". Consequently, another reappraisal began, using this definitive version to look back on all of Melville's other production and his own apparent use of *Billy Budd* to take stock of it as he neared death.

Recent criticism and controversy

In recent years, a number of major biographies—Laurie Robertson-Lorant's *Melville: A Biography* (1996), Hershel Parker's *Herman Melville: A Biography* (Vol. 1, 1996; Vol. 2, 2002), and Andrew Delbanco's *Melville: His World and Work* (2005)—have confirmed Melville's status as one of American literature's most significant and representative figures. However, some researchers contend that Melville physically abused his wife and created an atmosphere at home that led to his eldest son Malcolm's suicide and his younger son

Stanwix's settling on the opposite coast (San Francisco) and dying before the age of 40. Melville's daughter, Francis, despised him; she even burned all the letters he had sent to her.

More and more critical scrutiny is focusing on the elements in Melville's work impinging on a host of new areas, among them post-colonialism and imperialism, race and ethnography, internationalism, body criticism, and even ecology. For example, the 1855 short story "Benito Cereno" is one of the few works of 19th century American literature to confront the African diaspora and the violent history of race relations in America, while "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" and *Billy Budd* have been particularly rich for scholars of gender studies and queer studies, perhaps most notably Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

Bibliography

Novels

- *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846)
- *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas* (1847)
- *Mardi: And a Voyage Thither* (1849)

- *Redburn: His First Voyage* (1849)
- *White-Jacket, or The World in a Man-of-War* (1850)
- *Moby-Dick, or The Whale* (1851)
- *Pierre: or, The Ambiguities* (1852)
- *Isle of the Cross* (ca. 1853, since lost)^[2]
- *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile* (1856)
- *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857)
- *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)* (1924)

Short stories

- *The Piazza Tales* (1856)
 - "The Piazza" -- the only story specifically written for the collection. (The other five had previously been published in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*.)
 - "Bartleby the Scrivener"
 - "Benito Cereno"
 - "The Lightning-Rod Man"
 - "The Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles"
 - "The Bell-Tower"
- Uncollected
 - "Cock-A-Doodle-Do!" (*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, December 1853)

- "Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs" (*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, June 1854)
- "The Happy Failure" (*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, July 1854)
- "The Fiddler" (*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, September 1854)
- "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" (*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, April 1855)
- "Jimmy Rose" (*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, November 1855)
- "The 'Gees" (*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, March 1856)
- "I and My Chimney" (*Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, March 1856)
- "The Apple-Tree Table" (*Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, May 1856)
- Unpublished in Melville's lifetime
 - "The Two Temples"
 - "Daniel Orme"

Poetry

Books

- *Battle Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866)
- *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land* (1876)

- *John Marr and Other Sailors* (1888) Online edition
- *Timoleon* (1891) Online edition
- *Weeds and Wildings, and a Rose or Two* (1924)

Uncollected or unpublished poems

- "Epistle to Daniel Shepherd"
- "Inscription for the Slain at Fredericksburgh" [sic]
- "The Admiral of the White"
- "To Tom"
- "Suggested by the Ruins of a Mountain-temple in Arcadia"
- "Puzzlement"
- "The Continents"
- "The Dust-Layers"
- "A Rail Road Cutting near Alexandria in 1855"
- "A Reasonable Constitution"
- "Rammon"
- "A Ditty of Aristippus"
- "In a Nutshell"
- "Adieu"

Anthologized poems

- "The Maldive Shark"

- "Song from *Mardi*"
- "Jonah's Song" (from *Moby-Dick*) ["The ribs and terrors in the whale"]
- "The Portent (1859)"
- "Misgivings (1860)"
- "The Conflict of Convictions (1860-1)"
- "Shiloh: A Requiem (April 1862)"
- "Malvern Hill (July 1862)"
- "The House-top: A Night Piece (July 1863)"
- "'The Coming Storm': A Picture by S. R. Gifford, and owned by E. B. Included in the N. A. Exhibition, April, 1865"
- "'Formerly a Slave': An idealized Portrait, by E. Vedder, in the Spring Exhibition of the National Academy, 1865"
- "America"
- "The Tuft of Kelp"
- "The Berg (A Dream)"
- "After the Pleasure Party"
- "The Ravaged Villa"
- "Art"
- "Shelley's Vision"
- "In a Bye-Canal"
- "Pontoosuce"
- "Billy in the Darbies" (from *Billy Budd*)
- "Monody"

Essays (all uncollected during Melville's lifetime)

- "Fragments from a Writing Desk, No. 1" (*Democratic Press, and Lansingburgh Advertiser*, May 4, 1839)
- "Fragments from a Writing Desk, No. 2" (*Democratic Press, and Lansingburgh Advertiser*, May 18, 1839)
- "Etchings of a Whaling Cruise" (*New York Literary World*, March 6, 1847)
- "Authentic Anecdotes of 'Old Zack'" (*Yankee Doodle*, II, weekly [September 4 excepted] from July 24 to September 11, 1847)
- "Mr Parkman's Tour" (*New York Literary World*, March 31, 1849)
- "Cooper's New Novel" (*New York Literary World*, April 28, 1849)
- "A Thought on Book-Binding" (*New York Literary World*, March 16, 1850)
- "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (*New York Literary World*, August 17 and August 24, 1850)

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1. ^ *Collected Poems of Herman Melville*, Ed. Howard P. Vincent. Chicago: Packard & Company and Hendricks House (1947), 446.
2. ^ Robert S. Levine, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*. Cambridge, England and New York City: Cambridge University Press (1998), xviii. ISBN 0-521-55571-X

Further reading

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- Melville, Herman: *Redburn, White-Jacket, Moby-Dick* (G. Thomas Tanselle, ed.) (Library of America, 1983) ISBN 0-94045009-7
- Melville, Herman: *Pierre, Israel Potter, The Confidence-Man, Tales & Billy Budd* (Harrison Hayford, ed.) (Library of America, 1985) This volume also contains Melville's essays. ISBN 0-94045024-0

External links

- Arrowhead—The Home of Herman Melville
- Letters from Melville to Hawthorne
- Melville's page at Literary Journal.com-

- research articles on Melville's works
- Melville Room at the Berkshire Athenaeum
- New Bedford Whaling Museum
- The Life and Works of Herman Melville
- The Melville Society
- Works by Herman Melville at Project Gutenberg
- Biographical resources dedicated to Herman Melville

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