

*A Student's Guide to*  
***HERMAN MELVILLE***

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# CHAPTER 1

## SETTING SAIL

### An Introduction to the Life and Works of Herman Melville

**H**erman Melville died in relative obscurity in 1891, but in the next century he would be recognized as one of the greatest authors who ever lived. Indeed, *Moby Dick* is now considered not only one of the most significant American novels, but also a classic of world literature.

Dubbed “the poet of the sea” by well-known critic Elizabeth Hardwick, Herman Melville is something of a mystery.<sup>1</sup> Robert Spiller describes him as a complex man in whom “divergent impulses were at war.”<sup>2</sup> Hardwick also calls him “elusive,” a man whose restless spirit took him on journeys not only to the farthest parts of the world, but also to the innermost depths of the human soul.<sup>3</sup> These journeys blossomed into works of literature that have placed Melville in the ranks of the literary giants of the world.

## COMMON THEMES

Melville dealt not only with themes that were prevalent in his day—such as violence against women, racism, and the unjust plight of the common worker—but also with themes that transcended his era. Among these latter themes are the struggle between sons and their fathers (*Redburn*, *Moby Dick*, *Pierre*, *Billy Budd*), the individual pitted against the universe (*Moby Dick*), isolation and the failure to connect (*Moby Dick*), mortality, and the tension between responsibility and compassion (*Billy Budd*). Other important themes include innocence and the noble savage, conscience versus law, and the individual versus society.

## CHARACTER TYPES

Melville’s characters are often isolated from society. As Melville critic Linda Costanzo Cahir has observed, “For Melville, man is essentially and fully alone.”<sup>4</sup> Melville believed that to be human meant to be isolated. Indeed, in *Moby Dick*, he coins a new word—*Isolate*—to describe man’s isolation from his fellow man:

They were nearly all Islanders on the Pequod, Isolatoes too, I call such, not acknowledging the common continent of men, but each Isolate living on a separate continent of his own.<sup>5</sup>

To be sure, Melville admits there are rare moments in which human beings do truly connect—such as in the friendship between Ishmael and Queequeg. But even when people work closely together in community, each one is ultimately alone. As Cahir further observes: “Even if people function within a social structure, they are fundamentally alienated from the human community . . .

.. [Melville's] poetry and tales, as well as his novels, betray his profound and ongoing interest in the moral and philosophical implications of man's isolation. Melville's characters—those who choose exile, those who are involuntary outcasts, and even those who participate fully in their immediate society—are, one and all, fundamentally solitary.<sup>6</sup>

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