

Melville, Herman

(Aug. 1, 1819-Sept. 28, 1891)

Family Background



Herman Melville, the third child of Allan and Maria Gansevoort Melvill's eight, was born into a socially connected New York family. To his socialite parents, from his youth Herman did not seem to fit their mold of a good, God-fearing, noble and refined child.

In 1826 Allan Melvill wrote of his son as being "backward in speech and somewhat slow in comprehension . . . of a docile and amiable disposition." After the collapse of the family's import business in 1830 and Allan Melvill's death in 1832, Herman's oldest brother, Gansevoort, assumed responsibility for the family and took over his father's business. After two years as a bank clerk and some months working on the farm of his uncle, Thomas Melvill, Herman joined his brother in the business. About this time, Herman's branch of the family altered the spelling of its name.

Travels

By the mid-1830s, the young Melville had already begun writing, but continued financial problems for the family forced Herman to focus primarily on work. In 1837, his brother declared bankruptcy and arranged for Herman to ship out as cabin boy on the *St. Lawrence*, a merchant ship sailing in June 1839 from New York City for Liverpool.

Although he seemed to enjoy the life of sailing, Melville did not dedicate himself to the sea immediately after the summer voyage. Instead he continued to seek out ways of helping his family taking a series of teaching positions and then following his uncle out west in hopes of finding steady work. He never found the work he sought; so, in January 1841, he returned east and sailed on the whaler *Acushnet* on a voyage to the South Seas.



In June of the following year, the ship anchored in the Marquesas Islands in present-day French Polynesia. Melville's adventures here, somewhat romanticized, became the subject of his first novel, *Typee* (1846). In July Melville and a companion jumped ship and, according to the novel, spent about four months as guest-captives of the reputedly cannibalistic Typee people. Actually, in August he was registered in the crew of the Australian whaler *Lucy Ann*. Whatever its precise correspondence with fact, however, *Typee* was faithful to the imaginative impact of the experience on Melville: despite

intimations of danger, the exotic valley of the Typees was for Melville an idyllic sanctuary from a hustling, aggressive civilization.

When the *Lucy Ann* reached Tahiti, Melville joined a mutiny led by dissatisfied shipmates who had not been paid. The mutiny landed Melville in a Tahitian jail from which he escaped. On these events and their sequel, Melville based his second book, *Omoo* (1847). Lighthearted in tone, with the mutiny shown as something of a farce, it describes Melville's travels through the islands, accompanied by Long Ghost, formerly the ship's doctor, now turned drifter. The novel revealed Melville's bitterness against what he saw as the debasement of the native Tahitian peoples by so-called "civilizing" forces.

These travels, in fact, occupied less than a month. In November he signed as a harpooner on his last whaler, the *Charles & Henry*, out of Nantucket, Mass. Six months later he disembarked in Hawaii only to sign on as an ordinary seaman on the frigate *United States*, which in October 1844 returned him to Boston.

Mid-Century Popularity

When Melville rejoined his family, he found their fortunes had much improved. Gansevoort, had been appointed James K. Polk's secretary to the U.S. legation in London and was earning political renown. With this family's encouragement, Herman recorded his tales of the South Seas and began to seek out a publisher.

Both *Typee* and *Omoo* provoked a mix of enthusiasm and outrage, but Herman, now left with the responsibility of providing for the family following his oldest brother's sudden death, committed himself to writing for support. In the summer of 1847, Melville added the responsibility of marriage when Elizabeth Shaw, daughter of the chief justice of Massachusetts, agreed to wed. For more steady income, he became a regular contributor of reviews and other pieces to a literary journal. Melville also began a third book in 1847 that would become *Mardi*.p> Rather self-consciously, Melville conceived of his third book as quite different from both *Typee* and *Omoo*. It began as another Polynesian adventure but quickly set its hero in pursuit of the mysterious Yillah, "all beauty and innocence," a symbolic quest that ends in anguish and disaster. Upon its publication in 1847, public and critics alike received it coolly. Concealing his disappointment at the book's reception, Melville quickly wrote *Redburn* (1849) and *White-Jacket* (1850) in the manner expected of him. The critics acclaimed *White-Jacket* in particular; but both novels, however much they seemed to revive the Melville of *Typee*, revealed Melville's growing melancholy.



Melville had promised his publishers for the autumn of 1850 the novel first entitled *The Whale*, but he delayed delivery of the manuscript that would become *Moby Dick*. He had formed a friendship with Nathaniel Hawthorne, and their relationship reanimated

Melville's creative energies. Though the two men would gradually grow apart, their time as neighbors in 1850 -- Melville had bought a farm near Hawthorne's in Pittsfield, MA -- helped shape what is widely considered one of the greatest works of American literature.



Moby Dick was finally published in London in October 1851 and a month later in America, but it brought its author neither acclaim nor reward. Increasingly a recluse to the point that some friends feared for his sanity, Melville embarked almost at once on *Pierre* (1852). When published, it was yet another critical and financial disaster. Only 33 years old, Melville saw his career in ruins.

Near breakdown, and having to face in 1853 the disaster of a fire at his New York publishers that destroyed most of his books, Melville persevered with writing. *Israel Potter* was published in 1855, but its modest success, clarity of style, and apparent simplicity of subject did not indicate a decision by Melville to write down to public taste. Rather, his contributions to Putnam's Monthly Magazine--"Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853), "The Encantadas" (1854), and "Benito Cereno" (1855)--reflected an increasing despair and contempt for human hypocrisy and materialism.

In 1856 Melville traveled to Europe to renew his spirits. The most powerful passages of the journal he kept are in harmony with his final novel published in his lifetime *The Confidence-Man* (1857), a despairing satire on an America corrupted by the shabby dreams of commerce. Three American lecture tours were followed by his final sea journey, in 1860, when he joined his brother Thomas, captain of the clipper *Meteor*, for a voyage around Cape Horn. He abandoned the trip in San Francisco.

Withdrawal

Melville abandoned genre of the novel in favor of poetry, but the prospects for publication were not favorable. In 1861, with two sons and daughters to support, Melville sought a consular post, but did not receive the appointment. When the Civil War broke out, he volunteered for the Navy, but was again rejected. Melville got a bit of relief from an inheritance upon his father-in-law's death, and by the end of 1863 was living in New York City.

The war was much on Melville's mind and furnished the subject of his first volume of verse, *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866). Four months after it appeared, an appointment as a customs inspector on the New York docks finally brought him a secure income.

Despite poor health, Melville began a pattern of writing evenings, weekends, and on vacations. In 1867 his son Malcolm accidentally shot himself after a quarrel with his father the night before his death.



His second son, Stanwix, who had gone to sea in 1869, died in a San Francisco hospital in 1886 after a long illness. Throughout these painful events, and for the whole of his nineteen years in the customs house, Melville's creative pace was understandably slowed.

By the time his second collection of verse, *John Marr, and Other Sailors; With Some Sea-Pieces*, appeared in 1888, Melville had been in retirement for three years. His new leisure he devoted, he wrote in 1889, to "certain matters as yet incomplete." Among them was *Timoleon* (1891), a final verse collection. More significant was the return to prose that culminated in his last work, the novel *Billy Budd*, which remained unpublished until 1924. Though the manuscript ends with the date April 19, 1891 -- merely five months before Melville's death -- the work had not been completely edited (click [here](#) for a more full discussion of the manuscript). Melville's life was one more of valleys than of peaks. By the end of the 1840s he was among the most celebrated of American writers, yet his death evoked but a single obituary notice. After years of neglect, modern criticism has secured once again secured his reputation with that of the great American writers.

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)
- *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile* (1855)
- *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857)
- *Billy Budd* (written between 1888 and 1891; published posthumously 1924).

Other Stories, Sketches, and Journals

- *The Piazza Tales* (1856), includes "The Piazza," "Bartleby the Scrivener," "Benito Cereno," "The Encantadas, or, Enchanted Isles," and "The Lightning-Rod Man"

- *The Apple-Tree Table and Other Sketches* (1922), contains 10 pieces first published in periodicals between 1850-56
- *Journal up the Straits, October 1, 1856-May 5, 1857* (1935)
- *Journal of Melville's Voyage in the Clipper Ship, Meteor* (1929).

Verse

- *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866)
- *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land* (1876)
- *John Marr, and Other Sailors; With Some Sea-Pieces* (1888)
- *Timoleon* (1891)
- Poems unpublished during Melville's lifetime are included in later collections and selections.