



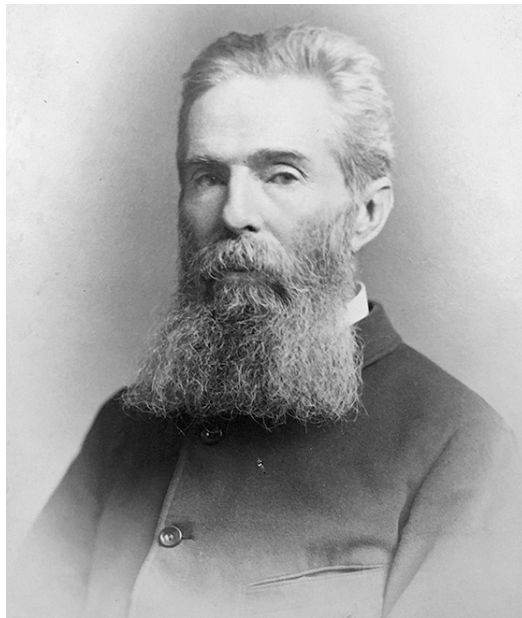
## The Catskill Eagle

The Rise and Fall and (Posthumous) Rise of Herman Melville

By Jerry James

*“...there is a Catskill eagle in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again...so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than the other birds upon the plain, even though they soar.”*

—Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*



*Herman Melville (1819-1891)*

Like the Catskill eagle, Herman Melville soared—and then dove, a probable victim of bipolar disorder. He was published for only twelve years during his lifetime, with initial success followed by the catastrophic failure of *Moby Dick*. At his death, the *New York Times* called him “Henry.” But Melville would soar again, years after his death, as his book became that most elusive of white whales, the “Great American Novel.”

### Early Life

Herman Melville was born in New York City on August 1, 1819. With roots in the upper

classes of both New York and Boston, he might have lived a life of anonymous ease. Unfortunately, his father Allan was a terrible businessman. When Melville was 12, the family, fleeing creditors, decamped for Albany in the middle of the night. Allan died the next year. His widow Maria added the final “e” to the family name and forgot him.

After age 10, Melville’s schooling was spotty. His spelling and penmanship were atrocious. He found temporary work as a bank clerk, his brother’s assistant in the fur business and a schoolteacher. Then, at 20, Melville shipped out on a voyage from New York to

Liverpool. After his return, he drifted before shipping out again in early 1841, this time from New Bedford, MA, on the whaleship *Acushnet*. He would not return for almost four years.

### The Whaling Industry



Men had hunted whales for thousands of years, so it had long been known that the blubber of the sperm whale yielded an oil that burned brighter and cleaner than any other. But whaling as an American commercial industry began in the early 1700s. By the time Melville was born, it had become a cartel, with 70 whaleships owned and operated by a few immensely wealthy Quakers. (One was named Starbuck, but the coffee chain is named after Melville's character.)

The sperm whale provided the makings for soap, perfume and medicinal ointment, but it was the oil that was most precious—and not only for its light. Whale oil was to grease the Industrial Revolution in America. Those looms in New England textile factories? Lubricated by whale oil. The railroads and steamboats crisscrossing America? The same.

By the time *Moby Dick* was written, the writing was already on the wall for the Quaker moguls. Kerosene (coal oil) had been invented in 1846, and in 1859, Col. Drake would drill the first oil well near Titusville, PA. Soon petroleum would rule. But that day was still far off when Melville went a-whaling.

### Four Years at Sea

Melville signed aboard the *Acushnet* for a

1/175 share of the profits. And like 40% of whalers, he would not hang around to collect that minuscule sum. After 18 months, Melville jumped ship in the Marquesas, then hitchhiked around the South Seas like an oceangoing Jack Kerouac, signing on and jumping ship when it suited him. His port calls read as if painted by Gauguin: Nukuheva, Tahiti, Eimeo, Moorea...



John La Farge, "Polynesian Girls Bathing"  
(detail)

Melville finally returned to Boston as a member of the US Navy, having enlisted in Hawaii in order to get there. He mustered out late in 1844 and went home to Mother Maria, his head full of South Sea memories he was eager to write down. As he would write in *Moby Dick*, "...a whaleship was my Yale College and my Harvard."

### Writer, Husband, Father

*Typee* (1846) was a smash. True, Melville had both elaborated on his actual experiences and enhanced them with a little discreet plagiarism. But the book sold, mainly because of its being peopled with exotic women— young, naked and implausibly chaste. *Omoo* (1847) provided more of the same.

*Typee* was dedicated to Boston judge Lemuel Shaw, who had been the executor of Allan Melvill(e)'s estate. In 1847, Allan's son, Herman, married the judge's daughter, Elizabeth "Lizzie" Shaw. The marriage was long lasting (ending only with Melville's death); fecund (producing four children); and

extremely unhappy (with intimations of domestic abuse).

The Melvilles borrowed from Judge Shaw to set up a home in New York City (with Mother Maria). For the first time, the author had access to a large library—and the means to pay for it. (The city’s first free library would not open until 1879.) Virgil’s *Aeneid* was a particular influence on Melville’s next book, the South Sea romance *Mardi*. Andrew Delbanco calls it, “a wildly miscellaneous mix of lyrical writing and... a babbling philosopher.” It was not particularly successful, which tightened the financial screws. And while the 1850 publications of *Redburn* and *White Jacket* (based on Melville’s voyages before and after his South Sea adventures) did better, a move soon became inevitable.



*Elizabeth Shaw Melville*  
(1822-1906)

### **Moby Dick**

Melville began writing *Moby Dick* in 1849. It would be finished in Pittsfield, MA, at his new home, Arrowhead, whose building required taking on more debt. There he settled his family (with Mother Maria). And there he met Nathaniel Hawthorne, who had written a glowing review of *Typee*. The two would become fast friends. Hawthorne had also added a letter to his last name—his ancestor, John Hathorne, had presided over the Salem Witch Trials.

Melville had been reading the Bible, Shakespeare, Shelley, Milton, Blake, Goethe and Carlyle. He was also familiar with the

seascapes of J. M. W. Turner, in which he saw intimations of the “howling infinite.” These influences echo through *Moby Dick*—a book part ripping yarn; part metaphysical contemplation; and part how-to-manual on how to pursue, kill and render the world’s largest toothed mammal into oil for the lamps of civilization. Melville found the novel’s finale in the tale of the whaleship *Essex*, which in 1820 was rammed and sunk by its supposed prey. (See the book and film, *In the Heart of the Sea*.)



*J. M. W. Turner, “Slave Ship” (Detail)*

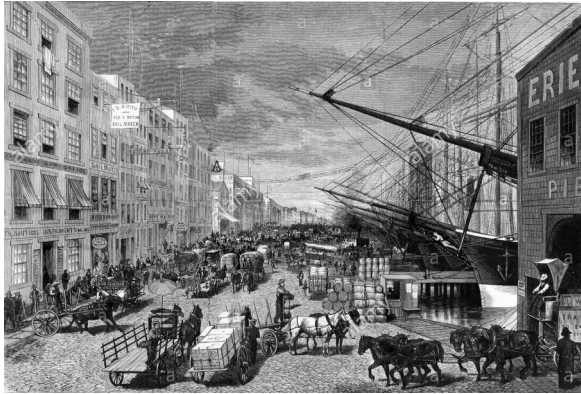
From the New England past Melville shared with Hawthorne came the name of Ahab’s ship. Pequot is a variant of Pequot, the dominant Native American tribe in Massachusetts until 1637. Ahab and his crew set sail on a floating reminder of American genocide.

*Moby Dick* (1851) was dedicated to Hawthorne, who offered to review it. Melville declined. Perhaps things would have been different had the novel been promoted by the author of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), which sold as many copies in ten days as *Moby Dick* would in three years. Instead, the reception was almost uniformly negative. What was a travel writer doing producing a book like this? It was as if Rick Steves had written *Ulysses*. The novel would sell with only 3,180 copies during Melville’s lifetime.

The failure of *Moby Dick* “sent Melville into a depression from which he never quite recovered,” writes Maria Popova. His next work, *Pierre* (1852), featured a young man, his

overbearing mother and the bland maiden to whom he is betrothed—until the day he meets another maiden, who strikes him to the heart. She turns out to be his half-sister. Complications ensue, and almost everyone ends up dead. One review was headlined, “HERMAN MELVILLE CRAZY.”

### Decline



NYC Waterfront, 1870s

Melville wrote for magazines, lectured and published two more novels. The short stories *Bartleby the Scrivener* and *Benito Cereno* are now considered American classics, but they didn't pay the bills. During the last 30 years of his life, Melville concentrated on poetry, most of which went unpublished.

In 1860, Judge Shaw took over Arrowhead as payment for Melville's debts, then deeded it to Lizzie. Three years later, she traded it for Melville's brother's Manhattan house. The author would live there until his death, with Lizzie, his four children and Mother Maria (d. 1872).

In 1853, Hawthorne had gone to Liverpool as American consul. Melville hoped for a

similar post, but his politics were wrong. He would not get a government job until 1866, and then only that of a lowly deputy customs inspector. The work paid poorly, but Melville refused bribes. In addition, his terrible handwriting made it impossible for him to advance in rank during his 19-year career. When he died on September 28, 1891, one obituary said, “his own generation had long thought him dead.”

### Resurrection

“Then, one day in 1916, the influential critic Carl Van Doren stumbled upon a dusty copy of *Moby Dick* in a used bookstore and was inspired to write an essay about it, calling Melville's work ‘one of the greatest sea romances in the whole literature of the world.’” (Popova) Soon, D. H. Lawrence and E. M. Forster extolled the novel. Melville was hailed as a precursor of modernism, of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. So it was that Tom Bissell could write, “[His] greatest work, as we today know it, was born 76 years after its initial publication.” Melville's posthumous reputation was further enhanced by the 1924 publication of his previously unknown novella, *Billy Budd*.

Today *Moby Dick* stands with *Huckleberry Finn* atop 19th century American literature. The Melville Society publishes its award-winning journal three times a year. “Moby,” a man claiming to be Melville's great-great-great nephew, has sold 20 million records worldwide. And *Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan* quotes Ahab.

The Catskill eagle soars again!

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