

This Day in History... November 14, 1851

Literary Classic *Moby-Dick* Published

One of the greatest books in American literature, *Moby-Dick*, was first published in the United States on November 14, 1851. Its author, Herman Melville, drew deeply from his own adventurous life at sea to craft what would become one of the most profound and symbolic novels ever written.

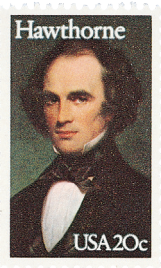
Born in New York City in 1819, Melville grew up fascinated by the ocean and the promise of adventure beyond the horizon. As a young man, he served in both the Merchant Marines and the US Navy, where he experienced the dangers and excitement of life aboard a ship. At age twenty-one, he joined the whaleship *Acushnet*, setting out on a voyage that lasted nearly two years. The long months of hard labor, fierce storms, and encounters with massive whales left an indelible mark on him. Those experiences would later form the foundation for his most famous work.



Set aboard the whaleship *Pequod*, *Moby-Dick* offers one of literature's most detailed portrayals of the 19th-century whaling industry, from harpoon design and whale anatomy to the global trade in whale oil that fueled lamps and machinery of the Industrial Age.

it repeatedly as his ideas evolved. Scholars believe he wrote the book in two or three stages, transforming it from a straightforward sea adventure into what he called "an epic of cosmic proportions." During this time, his friendship with fellow writer Nathaniel Hawthorne deeply influenced him; Hawthorne's dark and philosophical style encouraged Melville to explore themes of good and evil, fate, and obsession more deeply.

The novel was first published in London on October 18, 1851, under the title *The Whale*. British editors made hundreds of unauthorized revisions, cutting or altering passages they deemed controversial. Less than a month later, on November 14, the American edition appeared, newly titled *Moby-Dick*; or, *The Whale*, published by Harper & Brothers. Despite Melville's hopes, the



Hawthorne encouraged Melville to transform the book from a sea tale into a profound study of good, evil, and obsession.

book was misunderstood by most contemporary readers and critics. Many expected a simple sea adventure but instead encountered a dense, philosophical work filled with symbolism, biblical language, and long meditations on life and death.

Through the narrator Ishmael, Melville described the whaling industry in striking detail, blending factual observation with poetic reflection. The story's central conflict—Captain Ahab's obsessive hunt for the white whale—became a powerful metaphor for humanity's eternal struggle with obsession, pride, and the limits of understanding. The novel also explored religion, social class, authority, sanity, and the moral tension between idealism and vengeance.

Unfortunately, *Moby-Dick* marked the beginning of Melville's literary decline. His daring style alienated readers, and sales were poor. During his lifetime, only about 3,200 copies were sold, earning him roughly \$1,200. Struggling to support his family, Melville eventually took a steady job as a customs inspector in New York City, where he worked for nearly twenty years.

Although largely forgotten after his death in 1891, Melville's reputation was revived in the early 20th century. Critics began to recognize the novel's profound complexity and its daring exploration of human nature and the universe. Today, *Moby-Dick* is celebrated as one of the greatest masterpieces of American and world literature—a towering achievement that continues to challenge and inspire readers with its depth, symbolism, and timeless exploration of man's place in an unpredictable world.



Stamp pictures a Rockwell Kent illustration created for a 1930 reprinting of *Moby-Dick*.



Melville was the first author to have his works collected and published by the Library of America.

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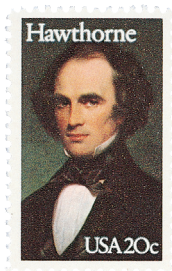
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