The Cambridge Introduction to Herman Melville

Despite its indifferent reception when it was first published in 1851, Moby-Dick is now a central work in the American literary canon. This introduction offers readings of Melville’s masterpiece, but it also sets out the key themes, contexts, and critical reception of his entire oeuvre. The first chapters cover Melville’s life and the historical and cultural contexts. Melville’s individual works each receive full attention in the third chapter, including Typee, Moby-Dick, Billy Budd and the short stories. Elsewhere in the chapter different themes in Melville are explained with reference to several works: Melville’s writing process, Melville as letter writer, Melville and the past, Melville and modernity, Melville’s late writings. The final chapter analyzes Melville scholarship from his day to ours. Kevin J. Hayes provides comprehensive information about Melville’s life and works in an accessible and engaging book that will be essential for students beginning to read this important author.

Kevin J. Hayes is Professor of English at the University of Central Oklahoma. He is the author of many books on Melville and American literature, including Melville’s Folk Roots (1999) and the Checklist of Melville Reviews (with Hershel Parker, 1991).
Cambridge Introductions to Literature

This series is designed to introduce students to key topics and authors. Accessible and lively, these introductions will also appeal to readers who want to broaden their understanding of the books and authors they enjoy.

- Ideal for students, teachers, and lecturers
- Concise, yet packed with essential information
- Key suggestions for further reading

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KEVIN J. HAYES
For Myung-Ran
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Everybody who has ever read *Moby-Dick* remembers when they first read it. For me, it was the winter of my sophomore year at the University of Toledo. Having yet to declare a major, I enrolled in Professor Hoch’s Poe-Hawthorne-Melville seminar with thoughts of majoring in English. Previously, I had read only one Melville work, “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” which Mrs Stutz had assigned us in high school English. For the remainder of that school year, Bartleby’s catch phrase – “I would prefer not to” – became a part of our classroom banter, but the story itself did not inspire me or exert a lasting influence on my life.

*Moby-Dick* did.

I still have the books I bought for Professor Hoch’s class, which I took – can it be? – almost thirty years ago. We read *Moby-Dick* in the Norton critical edition prepared by Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker. I have since added many other editions of *Moby-Dick* to my library, but I still cannot bring myself to let go of the first copy I ever owned. Its back is broken, and several pages flutter out every time I open it, but my Norton *Moby-Dick* continues to occupy an important place in my personal library. This is the book that inspired me to devote my life to the study of literature.

It contains underlined passages and marginal comments in three different colors of ink. Each color dates from a different reading. The lengthy comments in red are the most recent: they come from the first time I taught *Moby-Dick* in a Poe-Hawthorne-Melville seminar of my own. The comments in black ink are class notes from a graduate seminar Professor Parker taught at the University of Delaware. (The fact that I was attending graduate school at Delaware further reflects the influence of the Norton *Moby-Dick*: I had decided to study with one of its editors.) The brief marginal comments and the passages underlined in blue ink date from Professor Hoch’s undergraduate seminar.

There are noticeable differences in the quality of my marginalia. The red and the black are marks made by a literary professional learning his craft at the start of his career. The marginalia in blue seem amateurish in comparison. They make no notice of plot or narrative technique or characterization or imagery or symbolism. But these early marks do something the later ones
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do not: they reflect the thrill of discovery. Passages in my copy of Moby-Dick
underlined in blue represent points of contact, places in the text where Melville
had crystallized into words ideas that I had formed only in the vaguest and
most inchoate way.

The Cambridge Introduction to Herman Melville gives me the chance to share
with others the kind of opportunity I had as an undergraduate, to help readers
experience the thrill of discovery that comes from reading Melville for the
first time. The four chapters that comprise this book survey Melville’s literary
career from different perspectives. Chapter 1 tells the story of his life. Using
the opening chapter of Moby-Dick as a starting point, Chapter 2 introduces the
philosophical, historical, and cultural contexts through which to view Melville’s
writings. This chapter supplies in miniature many ideas that are more fully
developed in Chapter 3, which presents a series of critical discussions of his
work. And Chapter 4 tells the story of Melville’s critical reception, from the
contemporary enthusiasm that greeted Typee through the near-total neglect he
experienced through the Melville revival in the early twentieth century, a time
when the world discovered Melville.
Abbreviations


