



new bedford
whaling museum

ART. HISTORY. SCIENCE. CULTURE.

Making Meaning from Text:

Herman
Melville's
Moby-Dick

This lesson includes three sections:

1

INVESTIGATE (15 min.)

Click through the following slide deck to learn more about the American novelist Herman Melville.

2

INQUIRE (15 min.)

Analyze a series of artistic prints to make meaning from key passages or events in Melville's famed novel *Moby-Dick*.

3

IMAGINE (30 min.)

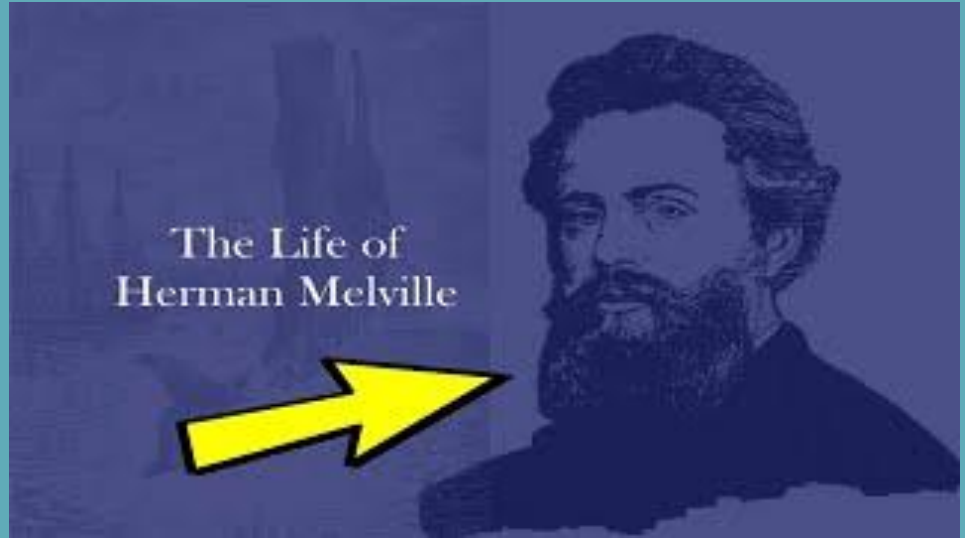
Follow the steps in the Activity Guide to create a work of art inspired by a passage from *Moby-Dick* or another literary work.

INVESTIGATE

Who is Herman Melville?

Herman Melville (1819–1891) was an accomplished writer -- a poet, novelist, and short story author -- whose fame grew posthumously. In fact, it wasn't until 1919, 100 years after his birth, that a true appreciation for his works grew, with *Moby-Dick* now being considered one of the great American novels.

While Melville had many jobs, including that of a teacher, he sailed as a “greenhand” working on merchant and whaling ships at sea. These years of experience are reflected in many of his novels, including living with “cannibals” and taking part in a mutiny that ended with jail time.



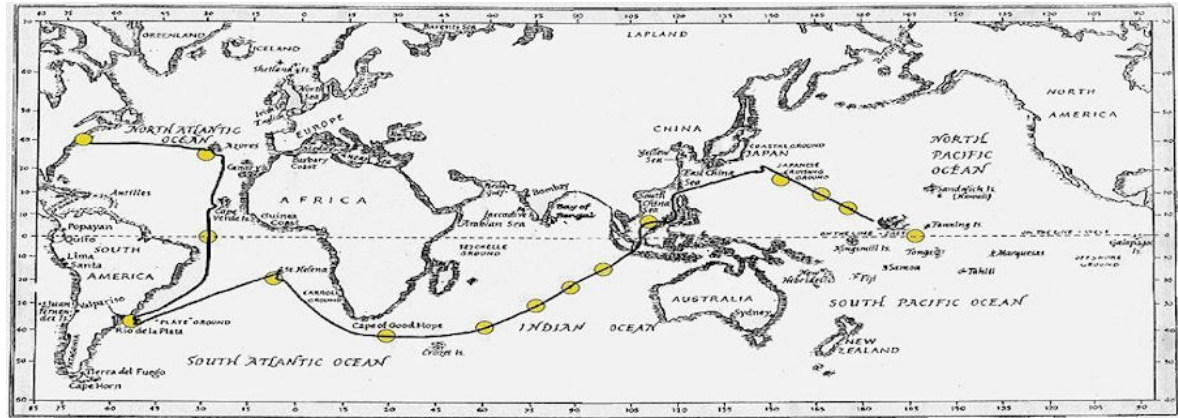
Where did Melville travel?

Herman Melville first sailed the summer of 1839 at age 20 from New York City on the merchant ship, *St. Lawrence*. In 1841, he joined the crew of *Acushnet*, a whaling ship from New Bedford, MA, bound for the Pacific Ocean. Melville also crewed on the *Lucy Ann* and served as a harpooner on the Nantucket whaler, *Charles and Henry*.

In 1843 he joined the U.S. Navy and sailed on the frigate *United States* in the Pacific Ocean.

A whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard.

—Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*



As a writer, Melville's first few novels (*Typee*, *Omoo*, *White-Jacket*) were successful, yet his popularity had waned by the time he wrote *Moby-Dick*. *The Whale*, first published in London in 1851, was published as *Moby-Dick* in America. While it is a detailed and authentic account of whaling, Melville's deep metaphors about the human spirit were not critically acclaimed or appreciated at first.

What is *Moby-Dick* an **allegory** for?
What themes are underscored in Melville's novel?

Nathaniel Hawthorne, author of the *The Scarlet Letter*, provided valuable feedback to Melville on his draft of *The Whale* (later to be titled *Moby-Dick*), which chronicled the adventures of hunting a white whale. It was Hawthorne who suggested that Melville take the draft and rework it into an allegorical tale.

What do
you think
about
Melville's
use of
symbolism?

ALLEGORY:

A narrative that
has a complex
hidden meaning
(often political or
moral)

When Melville's novel *Moby-Dick* was published in 1851, critics panned the book. Only 3,000 copies of *Moby-Dick* were sold during Melville's lifetime.

Later in life, when he was a customs officer, Melville shifted his creative efforts towards poetry. Some argue he is the first American modernist poet. Melville melted into a bit of obscurity later in life. In fact, some questioned his existence.

"There are more people to-day who believe Herman Melville dead than there are those who know he is living. And yet if one choose to walk along East Eighteenth Street, New York City, any morning about 9 o'clock, he would see the famous writer of sea stories -- stories which have never been equalled perhaps in their special line. Mr. Melville is now an old man, but still vigorous. He is an employee of the Customs Revenue Service, and thus still lingers around the atmosphere which permeated his books. Forty-four years ago, when his most famous tale, *Typee*, appeared, there was not a better known author than he, and he commanded his own prices. Publishers sought him, and editors considered themselves fortunate to secure his name as a literary star. And to-day? Busy New York has no idea he is even alive, and one of the best-informed literary men in this country laughed recently at my statement that Herman Melville was his neighbor by only two city blocks. "Nonsense," said he. "Why, Melville is dead these many years!" Talk about literary fame? There's a sample of it!"

[Edward W. Bok, NEW YORK PUBLISHERS' WEEKLY, NOVEMBER 15 1890](#)

When did Melville die?

Melville died at the age of 71 on September 28, 1891, with only one obituary in the *New York Times*:

Herman Melville died yesterday at his residence, 104 East Twenty-sixth Street, this city, of heart failure, aged seventy-two. He was the author of *Typee*, *Omoo*, *Mobie Dick*, and other sea-faring tales, written in earlier years. He leaves a wife and two daughters, Mrs. M. B. Thomas and Miss Melville. -- The New York Times, September 29, 1891

[Subsequent articles](#) -- many days later -- gave a nod to the acclaim he deserved:

- **Herman Melville, one of the most original and virile of American literary men, died at his home...** *Massachusetts Republican* 10/4/1891
- **A remarkable man of letters recently passed away in the person of Mr. Herman Melville...** *New York Mail & Express* 10/8/1891
- **In its kind this speedy oblivion by which a once famous man so long survived his fame is almost unique, and it is not easily explicable...** *The New York Times* 10/2/1891

INQUIRE

Time to question!

Artist Robert Del Tredici has created numerous prints inspired by *Moby-Dick*, including more than [40 items](#) in the collection of the New Bedford Whaling Museum. Examine the works of art, inspired by the novel, which are shown on the following slides.

How can you use these as visual reminders of key events and themes of the book? Choose one to discuss how it relates to the essence of the corresponding chapter in the novel. How does the artist interpret the work of the novelist?

NAME: _____

MIXED MEDIA

Directions:

Take a look at one of the seven Robert Del Tredici's prints. Choose one to analyze.

In general, what were your first impressions of Del Tredici's work?

How does the image connect to the quotation from *Moby-Dick*?

How does the image impact your understanding of Melville's words?

What other details might you have added if you were the artist?

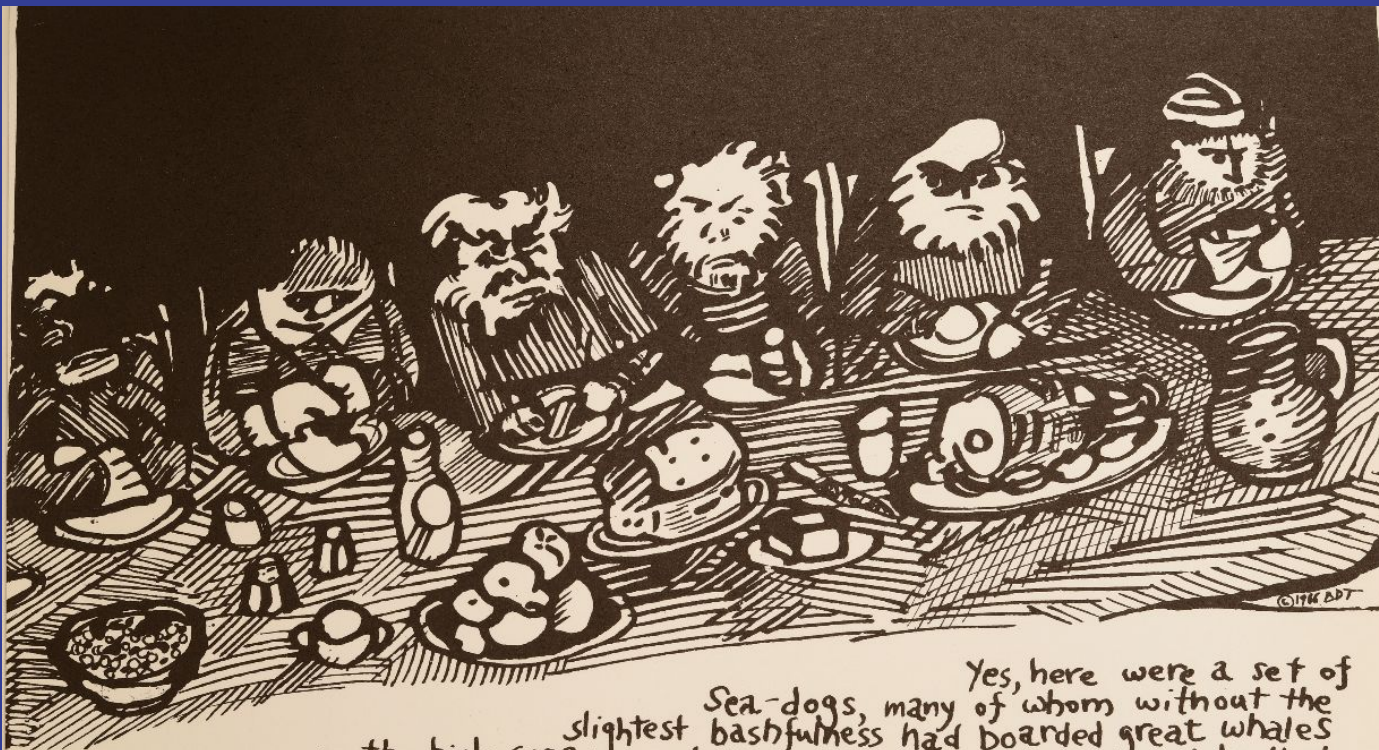
Which chapter of *Moby-Dick* would you like to see Del Tredici represent?

Chapter 5 – Breakfast



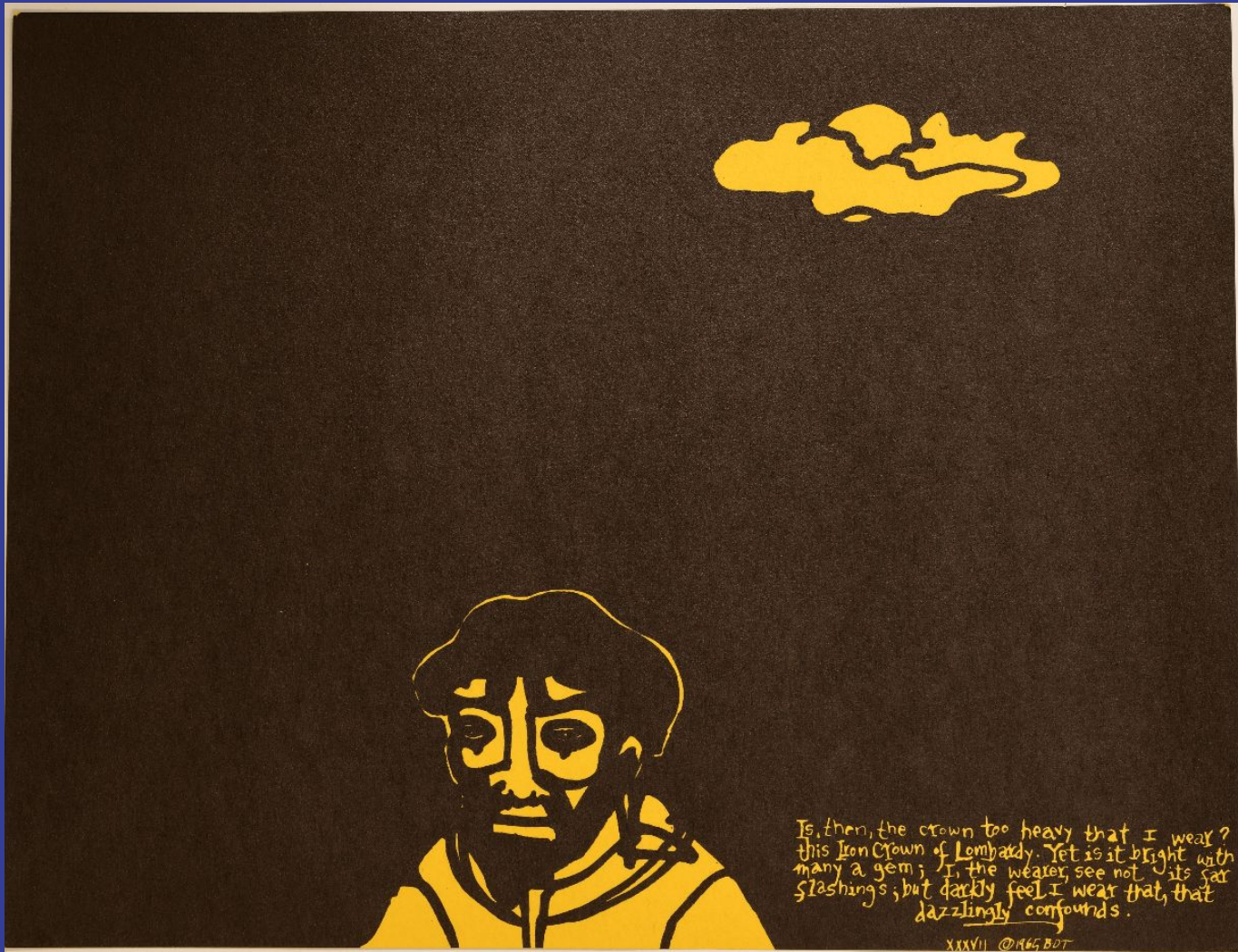
And the man that has anything bountifully laughable
about him, be sure there is more in that man than you
perhaps think for: (Chit Bunkface)

ONE BY



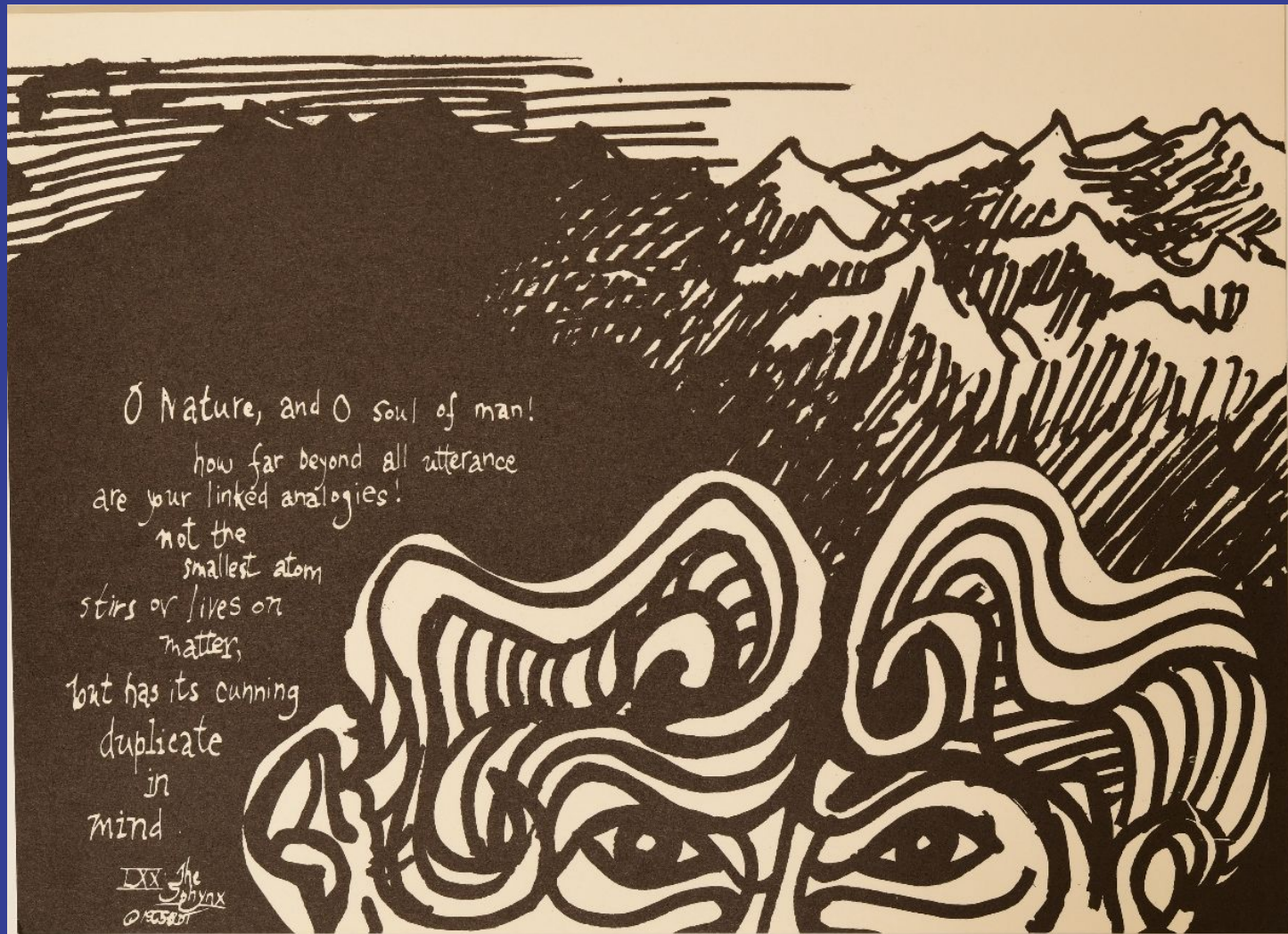
Yes, here were a set of Sea-dogs, many of whom without the slightest bashfulness had boarded great whales on the high seas—entire strangers to them—and duelled them dead without winking; and yet, here they sat at a social breakfast table—all of the same calling, all of kindred tastes—looking round as sheepishly at each other as though they had never been out of sight of some sheepfold among the Green Mountains. A curious sight; these bashful bears, these timid warrior whalemén! (Ch. II: Breakfast)

Chapter 37 -
Sunset



Is, then, the crown too heavy that I wear?
this Iron Crown of Lombardy. Yet is it bright with
many a gem; I, the wearer, see not its far
flashings; but darkly feel I wear that, that
dazzlingly confounds.

XXXVII @185 BOT



O Nature, and O soul of man!
how far beyond all utterance
are your linked analogies!
not the
smallest atom
stirs or lives on
matter,
but has its cunning
duplicate
in
mind.

LXX The Sphynx
O. W. S.

Now, mark. Unerringly impelling this dead, impregnable, uninjurable wall, and this most buoyant thing within, there swims behind it all a mass of tremendous life, only to be adequately estimated as piled wood is — by the cord; and all obedient to one volition, as the smallest insect.

Ch. ~~LXXVI~~ The Battering-Ram
1876-5 391



Chapter 76 – The Battering-Ram

To trail the genealogies of these high mortal miseries carries
us at last among the sourceless primogenitures of the gods; so
that, in the face of all the glad, hay-making suns, and
that, soft-cymballing, round harvest moons, we must needs give in to
this: that the gods themselves are not for ever glad.

The ineffaceable,
sad birthmark on the
brow of man, is but the
stamp of sorrow in the signers.

Ch. XVI
Ahab's
Leg

©BDA65

IMAGINE

Time to create!

Be inspired by artists like Robert Del Tredici, [Rockwell Kent](#), and [Matt Kish](#) who have created works of art related to quotations or events from Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*.

Use the Activity Guide to engage in close reading of a passage from the book. Then create a work of art inspired by Melville's words.

Activity Guide: Art from Text

Your Challenge

Be inspired by artists like Robert Del Tredici, [Rockwell Kent](#), and [Matt Kish](#) who have created works of art related to quotations or events from Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*.

Select a chapter or passage from the book or another novel. Use the steps below to engage in a close read of the text. Then use the quotation to create a visual image on paper or a screen.

Materials

- Text of *Moby-Dick* or another novel
- Art-making materials, like paper, pencils, paint, markers, scratchboard, or a digital device

Time to Create

STEP 1: CLOSE READ

- Choose a passage from the text that stuck out to you or grabbed your attention.
- Read the text and make observations.
 - Highlight key ideas and underline important words.
 - Circle unfamiliar words or confusing passages.
 - Write questions, notes, and ideas in the margins.
- Read the text again and make more observations.

STEP 2: SYNTHESIZE

- Consider the meaning of the text.
 - Look for patterns or connections about the characters, setting, and mood.
 - What new ideas do you have about the text?
 - What images does the text bring to mind?
- Use your observations to deepen your understanding of the text.

STEP 3: CREATE

- Use an artistic medium of your choosing to create a work of art inspired by the text.
- Copy the quotation onto paper or a screen and illustrate or react to the words.
- Share your work with others to compare artistic choices.
- How does the image help you make meaning of the text?

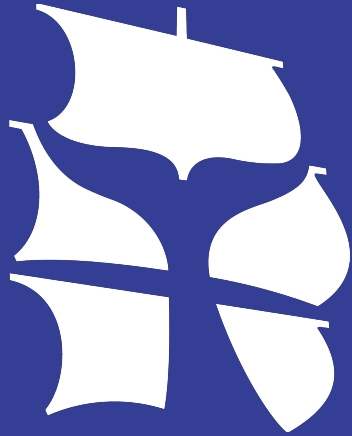
Additional resources

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE: *The Life of Herman Melville*

THE MELVILLE SOCIETY: Digital Resources

THE NEW YORKER: *Herman Melville at Home*

MOBY-DICK BIG READ: Listen to the novel



For more
classroom activities,
visit the
New Bedford Whaling
Museum website:

www.whalingmuseum.org

Media citations

Slide 4 video: *The Life of Herman Melville* from [Lit Tips](#);
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ezQVgLDD2uw>

Slide 5 image: <http://readmoby.com/>

Slide 8 & 9 quotes: <http://www.melville.org/hmobit.htm>

Slide 11: The New Bedford Whaling Museum, [00.124.55](#)

Slide 12: The New Bedford Whaling Museum, [00.124.70](#)

Slide 13: The New Bedford Whaling Museum, [00.124.52](#)

Slide 14: The New Bedford Whaling Museum, [00.124.47](#)

Slide 15: The New Bedford Whaling Museum, [00.124.77](#)

Slide 16: The New Bedford Whaling Museum, [00.124.68](#)