

## Five Fascinating Facts about Herman Melville, the author of Moby-Dick

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1. Much of his mature work was a flop during his lifetime. Much of Melville's later work – the majority of which is now his most highly regarded fiction – was neither critically nor commercially successful when it was first published. Between 1863 and 1887, an average of 23 copies of *Moby-Dick* – now his most widely read book – were sold each year. It now sells more copies each year than were sold in the entire nineteenth century and is acknowledged as a classic. (Of course, its influence can even be seen in the modern world of coffee and capitalism: the founders of the Starbucks chain took the name from a character in Melville's novel.)

*Moby-Dick* has been made into a film several times, with the first being a silent movie from 1926 called *The Sea Beast*, starring John Barrymore as Captain Ahab. (You can watch the whole film here – hooray!) Other notable adaptations include the 1956 John Huston film, which featured a screenplay written by Huston in collaboration with Ray Bradbury. (If 'collaboration' is Herman Melville quite the word: things got off to a bad start when, during a meeting at the production stage, Bradbury informed Huston of *Moby-Dick* that he'd 'never been able to read the damned thing'. Bradbury wrote a fictionalised account of his fraught involvement with the film in his novel *Green Shadows, White Whale*.)

2. Melville had a famous neighbour. Another giant of nineteenth-century American fiction, Nathaniel Hawthorne – perhaps best known for his novel about adultery, *The Scarlet Letter* – lived next door to Melville for a time. Melville dedicated *Moby-Dick* to Hawthorne.

3. Long before the modernist vogue for novels set during the course of just one day, Melville was experimenting with such an idea. His last novel, the 1857 work *The Confidence-Man*, drew on the idea of a confidence trickster or con-man (then a new idiom in American society): the novel, which is all about a man who fools people, was set on one single day, April Fool's Day. (Appropriately enough, the novel was also published on this day – we've previously written about this in our April Fool's literary quiz.) However, the book was not a success and after this Melville gave up writing novels, and lived out the remainder of his life as a customs house official. His short story 'Bartleby, the Scrivener', is also now regarded as a classic, and the story's main character inspired the name of the book website.

4. Melville's paternal grandfather led the Boston Tea Party in 1773. And while we're on the subject of famous ancestors, Melville himself is an ancestor of a famous name from the music industry: the DJ Moby is supposedly related to Melville, as the DJ's real name – Richard Melville Hall – suggests. Indeed, Moby has said that Melville was his great-great-great-granduncle.

5. Although he's better known for his fiction, Melville has an interesting poetic claim to fame. Melville's 1876 work *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land* is the longest published poem in American literature. It is almost 18,000 lines, putting it a fair way ahead of *Paradise Lost* with its 10,000 lines. *Clarel* was published in two volumes in 1876, nearly 20 years after Melville had given up publishing fiction. Like his novels, it was largely ignored when it was published, though in the wake of the modernist interest in the long poem, especially those written by T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, the poem has attracted more attention. If you have a spare fortnight, you can read the entire poem for free on Wikisource.