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Herman Melville

Lead: After early acclaim as a young writer, Herman Melville, the author of the majestic novel *Moby-Dick*, passed many years in relative obscurity.

Intro: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: The second son of eight children, Melville was born into an old and prominent American family. One of his grandfathers, disguised as a Mohawk, helped plan and execute a certain tea party of historical renown in Boston harbor during the run-up to the American Revolution. Jerked into

real life by the bankruptcy and death of his father, Melville shipped out as a sailor, spending several years in various vessels including time spent on a whaler in the Pacific.

Returning from his voyages in 1844, he had a memory well-stocked with fascinating stories. Urged by his family and friends to record them, he produced in a few short weeks the novel, *Typee*, a semi-autobiographical description of his life among cannibalistic natives on a South Pacific island. The novel was an instant success and overnight it made Melville a celebrity. Crowds of admiring readers would literally mob him on the streets of Boston. When he married Elizabeth Shaw in 1847 the site of the

wedding had to be moved at the last minute to prevent disruption by intrusive fans.

After his early novels, characterized by a licentious exuberance that made them appealing to a wide audience, Melville began, in 1851, the novel that would establish him a major literary figure. For months he labored with great intensity to produce *Moby-Dick*. This novel, with its unrelenting journey into the depths of human darkness, was ill-suited for its age and received unenthusiastic reviews. It sold fairly well but soon slipped into obscurity, re-emerging to be recognized as a masterpiece only in the 1920s, a more cynical and jaded era.

In the forty years following the publication of *Moby-Dick* Melville endured periodic bouts of depression and long creative dry spells. Despite this he produced nine additional novels including a literary re-telling of the famous mutiny on the *USS Somers*. He called it *Billy Budd*. Herman Melville died in 1891.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick: An Authoritative Text*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1967.

Parker, Hershel. *Reading Billy Budd*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1990.

**Wernick, Robert. "In Melville's Life, Fame Proved Fickle,"
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