IN PREPARATION FOR READING *MOBY DICK:*

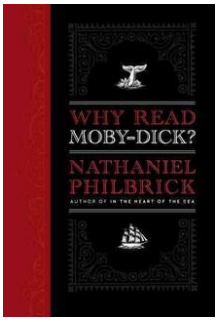
Look for the following ideas and concepts to find their way into this writing of Melville's novel:

- Allusions to *Macbeth, Hamlet, King Lear*, and other tragedies
- Revenge/Mob mentality vs. Loyalty/ Extremism vs. Reason
- Shakespearean Jester/Fool and Truth telling: Sanity vs. Insanity
- Aristotelian tragic hero/Ahab as tragic hero/Ishmael as hero
- Biblical names and allusions

THEMES: This is a summary list of the basic themes that run through the novel, themes that find their way into and play out in pretty much all of the literature we'll read this year. It's all part of the discovery and the molding of a true and unique American voice in literature. While you don't have to keep a written record, one of the things you will most likely be asked to do is to provide quotes or scenes from the novel that illustrate these themes. Just a head's up …

1. **<u>Individualism:</u> A reliance on the self; a personal affirmation typically involving a resistance and struggle to retain one's identity and ideals in a mass society.**
2. **<u>The Search for a Voice:</u> An effort to abandon the imitation of British authors and transform the literary language into the raw and rich tones of truly American voices.**
3. **<u>Moral Struggle:</u> The struggle of evil (whether an embodied presence or a formidable inner force) vs. good (reformers, individual heroism, struggle against the "power of blackness").**
4. **<u>The Journey:</u> Although sometimes a literal quest, and sometimes a passage from innocence to maturity/wisdom, this expedition has come to represent the voyage of life itself, often reflecting the struggles, endurance, renewal of life.**
5. **<u>The Frontier:</u> This theme typically incorporates all the previous themes as it stresses dependence on and building of one's character, faced with new challenges and decisions, often with the only law being one's conscience.**
6. **<u>The American Dream/Nightmare</u>: The offer/promise of spiritual and material fulfillment, sometimes looking beyond the land to human nature itself as the key to a better world, occasionally incorporating the quest for freedom and equality – a "rags-to-riches" concept that often goes awry.**
7. **<u>Initiation:</u> Moving from innocence to maturity. May involve a new sense of identity and purpose, a deeper understanding or awareness, or a new vision; this may be gradual or come in an apocalyptic moment; stresses a new knowledge about being human.**
8. **<u>Conformity vs. Rebellion:</u> To go with the flow, or reject the predictable, mundane, already established lifestyle or design. Most closely tied to the Individualism and Quest themes.**

Before reading the James Wood article on Melville's novel, check out the transcription of NPR's interview with Nathaniel Philbrick on "Why Read *Moby Dick.*"



'Why Read Moby-Dick?': A Passionate Defense Of The 'American Bible'

Heard on "All Things Considered"

October 17, 2011 - MELISSA BLOCK, host: This is ALL THINGS CONSIDERED from NPR News. I'm Melissa Block.

ROBERT SIEGEL, host: And I'm Robert Siegel.

Now a new, small book about a big old one. The old one is Herman Melville's "Moby-Dick," a book which I admit that I read for the first time just last year.

It's not that I didn't know the story. As a kid, I saw the movie with Gregory Peck as Captain Ahab. Later, I read the classic comic book. And in 1962, I was actually one of the very few people to see Orson Welles' stage adaptation on Broadway with Rod Steiger. It folded so fast - after only 13 performances - that they gave away free tickets at my high school.

My experience confirms what Nathaniel Philbrick writes in his slim new book, packed with insight, called "Why Read Moby-Dick?" Even people who haven't read it, know about the white whale and the obsessive Captain Ahab. The novel is much more than its plot. And much more than some of the simplistic summaries of what it's supposed to be about. Nathaniel Philbrick joins us, fittingly from Nantucket. Welcome to the program.

NATHANIEL PHILBRICK: It's great to be here.

SIEGEL: And, first, the answer to the question of your title. This book runs hundreds of pages, life is short, "Why Read Moby-Dick?"

PHILBRICK: Read "Moby-Dick" because I think it's as close to being our American Bible as we have. It's just full of great wisdom. But it also is just an amazing read. The level of the language is like none other. And it's a book I keep dipping into on a regular basis, almost on a daily basis.

SIEGEL: As you describe it, Herman Melville was already a successful writer when he wrote a novel about whaling, that would be more of an adventure story - I guess, then when it turned into - at a time when Americans actually associated adventure more with the Western frontier than with the seas. And the scrapped this book and he added all of the incredibly rich undertones and overtones that make it "Moby-Dick." Why? What happened?

PHILBRICK: Well, he met Nathaniel Hawthorne and read some of his stories, and it was Hawthorne's power of blackness that forever changed Melville. Melville realized what he wanted to do with this novel was entirely different from his original aim, and he completely reinvented the book and invented Ahab and made it the classic it is today.

SIEGEL: Hawthorne is central here, but you also write about the Melville's mid-life encounter with the plays of Shakespeare and his ambition to outdo Shakespeare.

PHILBRICK: Yeah. Well, Melville came to Shakespeare quite late, which I think proves it's best to come to books like "Moby-Dick" and to Shakespeare after we've had some life experience. And reading Shakespeare just infused Melville's language, brought it to a level that is just unapproachable. And this combination of meeting Hawthorne, but having Shakespeare as a new launching pad, made for an incredible combination that made "Moby-Dick" possible.

SIEGEL: And you observe that it was characters like Iago in "Othello," complex characters that Melville really engaged with when he read Shakespeare.

PHILBRICK: Yeah, and they're all over "Moby-Dick." But what Melville did is he applied it to his own experiences whaling and also with what was going on in America, with the Civil War approaching. And so, it made this incredible stew of influences that made it a book that really will be relevant in all times.

SIEGEL: Speaking of stew, when you read "Moby-Dick," as I did fairly recently - and enjoyed it tremendously, I might say - there are chapters which will be devoted to a recipe for clam chowder. Or a long essay on the nature of whales - not the most current zoology that one might read, but interesting. Or these incredibly detailed descriptions of how a whale and vessel actually operated. It's not just the plot outline that we're talking about here.

PHILBRICK: No, the book is full of almost chapters that are side bars that go off on tangents, that can be kind of frustrating if you're trying to follow the plot. But which lead into wormholes of just metaphysical poetry that are truly revelatory. And so, reading "Moby-Dick," you have to have some patience, but it really is those little sidebars that take you in all sorts of directions that ultimately give it that great magisterial power.

SIEGEL: You write about the poetry of Melville's writing, and I wonder if you could read an example of that for us now.

PHILBRICK: Yeah. This is a passage from Chapter 51. And it's called "The Spirit Spout," and picks up with the Pequod just south of St. Helena.

(Reading) While gliding through these latter waves in at one serene and moonlit night, when all the waves rolled by like scrolls of silver, and by their soft, suffusing seethings, made what seemed a silvery silence, not a solitude. On such a silent night, a silvery jet was seen far in advance of the white bubbles at the bow. Lit up by the moon, it looked celestial; seemed some plumed and glittering god uprising from the sea.

SIEGEL: Wow, when you read that, I can imagine the Melville reading it aloud as he was writing it. It sounds very much like elaborate spoken prose.

PHILBRICK: It is. And, you know, it's iambic pentameter at times. And the level of the writing is truly poetic, and yet he's telling this epic story. And so, the combination is really one that was built for the ages.

SIEGEL: The crew of the Pequod includes mostly whites, but blacks, Indians, Filipinos - I guess a very famous South Sea Islander, all of them sailing for a monomaniacal, revenge-seeking captain in search of a white whale that did him dirty. You say that we're reading an allegory here of mid-19th century America.

PHILBRICK: Yeah. When Melville was working on this in 1850 and '51, all the chaos that was about to become the Civil War in a decade was in there in the society. The fugitive slave law had just been passed and everyone knew that America was headed towards a cataclysm. And all of that is in the subtext of "Moby-Dick." And I think it means that in the future, whenever we will run into an eminent cataclysm, "Moby-Dick" will once again be relevant.

SIEGEL: It's not just that the Fugitive Slave Act was passed, as you write: Melville's father-in-law was the judge who upheld it, which meant that people in Free States were complicit in slavery. They were obliged to return slaves to their owners.

PHILBRICK: Yes. And this meant that slavery wasn't just a Southern issue. Everyone was involved in it. And Melville was involved in about as close as a way as you can. His father-in-law was right in the middle of it. And riots were breaking out in Boston, and Judge Shaw was the focal point of all this unrest. So, all of this played into everything that's going on with Ahab and Moby Dick, as it makes its way towards the white whale.

SIEGEL: So, here's the irony of Melville's "Moby-Dick," he'd already written books that sold well and "Moby-Dick" was neither a critical nor a commercial success. What happened? How did it achieve its current status?

PHILBRICK: Well, you know, "Moby-Dick" was a great disaster when it came to the critical reception. It did not sell well. And Melville would go on to write a number of books, but would really die a virtually unknown writer.

And it wasn't until the other side of World War I, with the ex-pats in Paris and others rediscovering the book, that people began to see that contained in "Moby-Dick" is sort of the genetic code of what's going on in America and throughout the world, when it comes to people dealing with issues of authority and

nature and all of this. And so, the irony is that Melville died in obscurity and yet resurfaced in the 20th century to become one of the great, renowned writers of our age.

SIEGEL: Well, Nathaniel Philbrick, thanks a lot for talking with us about, I guess, we can say your favorite book.

PHILBRICK: Yes, definitely my favorite book. Thank you.

SIEGEL: Nathaniel Philbrick, who is the author as well of "In The Heart Of The Sea," has now written a book called "Why Read Moby-Dick?"

You're listening to ALL THINGS CONSIDERED from NPR News.

***Now read the James Wood article that was distributed to sophomores taking Honors American Literature in their junior year.**