

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

Woman in Melville

Interview with Claudia A. Dixon, author of Bringing Her Home: The Woman in Herman Melville, March 2013.

In the simplest terms, where can the general reader see the power that this gender identification gives a book like *Moby-Dick*? Which three scenes or which three aspects of Melville’s work reflect this quality?

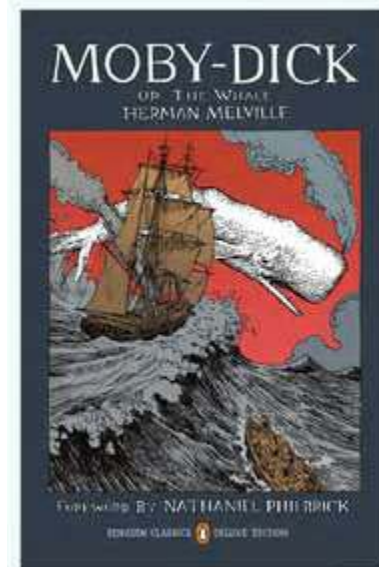
It is not as easy as pointing to a specific scene and saying, “See? There it is!” That would be like finding a singular whale in the vast ocean. The clues are subtle and symbolic and accrete over time and then you begin to sense something is going on, you feel the palpable presence of something that is *not* being said—the proverbial elephant (or whale) in the room. The mounting pressure of what is not said, obscured by all of Melville’s digressions and perorations about things that aren’t really part of the action of the story, may frustrate you and make you angry. (It certainly did me the first time I read *Moby-Dick*).

But that, as it turns out, is where the ‘power’ lies. Don’t take the story at face value, look for what is hidden, assume there is something hidden. Ask yourself, “What is the meaning of the White Whale? What is the meaning of Ahab’s missing leg?”

Why does Ahab say he has a “queenly personality?” Why does he say he widowed his wife when he married her? Why is he obsessed? Why does he say, “All visible objects, man, are but pasteboard masks?” What is he hiding? What is the meaning of the vortex that consumes the ship at the end?

And then look at other works by Melville, and see if you see a pattern emerging, a similar feeling in your gut about what may be going on. And then, like me, if you become as obsessed as Ahab looking for what hides behind the “pasteboard mask” of the story, look at critical essays about it and see if anyone else has tried to name it.

It is a journey. That’s all I can say.



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2. How does a character like Ahab reflect Melville’s powerful inner conflicts?

Ahab is the apex of manly rage in Melville’s work. There is an arc to his self-representations but Ahab is at the top—all rage. Ahab, like Melville, is aware that he is a damaged man, he has been symbolically castrated, and it drives him to exact revenge on the creature that took his manhood away.

I am not the first to notice this connection, nor am I the first to claim that the White Whale represents his mother (see D.H. Lawrence and Camille Paglia's *Sexual Personae*). But I think I am the first to assert that it is Melville's powerful identification with his mother and his anger at her for being the cause of it that drives Ahab. I think Ahab more than any other Melville character shows Melville's sense of damage and rage. It was a great relief to him to write it and to have his friend Hawthorne understand it.

But if Ahab is Melville's revenge on his mother, she has the last say. Ahab dies lashed to her in the end, a sign perhaps that Melville felt the futility of his struggle, that no matter what he does Melville and his mother cannot separate. As Ahab says, "Yet while I earthly live, a queenly personality lives in me."

Another of your comments raises a question: "Reading Melville's life and work in this way turns everything around and changes everything we think we know." Are all authors reflecting their personal lives in their work? Does it matter? Can a general reader get more out of a work by understanding how it was created?

Absolutely! We write from what we know, what we care about, what we dream, what we have experienced. But whether any particular author is writing to exorcize a personal demon, as I think Melville was, I can't say. What a writer chooses to write about says a lot, and there is meaning even in the way he writes about it. And yes it matters, but only if it matters to *you*. I know plenty of casual readers who don't care. They just want a good page-turner to go to sleep with at night. *Moby-Dick* would not be for them.

Why might it be rewarding for young readers to use critical theories like this when they read works of fiction? Do they apply to contemporary fiction as well?

As a student, I was really turned on by reading critical essays. They unlocked the hidden mysteries for me and gave me something to hang on to, a conversation to enter into. Say you read a critical essay that you disagree with. That is gold. It gives you something to push back against and a vocabulary to do it with. The more criticism you read the more persuasive you can make your own argument. There is a whole new list of critical work out there talking about graphic novels and new genres like that.

How can we characterize someone—Jane Austen, maybe, or Tom Clancy—who writes from a purely female or male viewpoint—someone who has no issues with gender? Can their writing be rich in the same way as that of someone who does struggle with these basic emotions?

Oh sure. There are more things that can lend power to writing than just gender conflicts. But I think no one sits down to the lonely arduous task of writing a story or novel or poem, without some driving force behind them, even if it is just to try to make money. Who would want to do such a crazy thing otherwise?

Can you contrast a typical Melville female—“spectral, elusive, and abandoned”— with a strong female character from another author’s universe?

How about Jo March from Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* or Charlotte Brontes’s *Jane Eyre*? These are self-assured women, secure in their identity. And how about Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games*, powerful and determined but still empathetic and compassionate. Or Jane Austen’s women, or Dickens’s heroines in *Little Dorritt* and *Bleak House*.

In all of these stories, the character and the world she inhabits is concrete, not symbolic. They know who they are, they persevere, they triumph.

Melville, like Poe, Hawthorne, and D.H. Lawrence, puts his women in dark, liminal places and has them waver, has them suggest something else not stated.

Hemingway is certainly another author who struggled with gender issues. What other authors can you point to whose writing reflects similar richness in consideration of the split between genders?

D. H. Lawrence, for sure, Poe, Hawthorne.

I would rather talk about recent films that talk about gender. If you look at the films of David Fincher (especially *Fight Club*) you will see gender issues and conflicts being acted out. *The Skin I live In* is a recent movie by Pedro Almodovar. It is so gender-bending it will blow your mind. *Fight Club*, because the two characters are really doubles and the whole issue of masculinity is the focus. Tyler Durden is the driving masculine force and the narrator is his other half, the more conscious and struggling to understand half. In the final scene you cannot tell which is the girl in the picture and which is the man, the narrator. This is a very conscious decision on Fincher’s part, I think. I think the “fight” in question is going on inside the narrator. And what is the first rule of fight club? “Don’t talk about Fight Club.” Awesome.

There is a palpable difference between movies like *Tootsie* and *Fight Club*. *Tootsie* is a romantic comedy that talks about the dilemma most women face in society by having a very heterosexual and unconflicted masculine man cross-dress and deal with discrimination, sexual harassment, etc. It makes a joke about how people react to that. It is very funny and, I think, a really good movie. It takes a feminist point of view about social gender roles. But *Fight Club* interrogates masculinity more subliminally, presenting cultural demands psychologically. It is meant to disturb, not gently entertain.

9. Are there any other critical works you can recommend for the general reader with an interest in this topic?

Gilbert and Gubar’s *Madwoman in the Attic* and Camille Paglia’s *Sexual Personae* are the most important works for unlocking the hidden secrets in literature. Especially *Madwoman*, which is very accessible to the student and lay reader alike.

I would also mention:

Judith Butler —*Gender Trouble*

Mary Douglas—*Purity and Danger*

Marjorie Garber—*Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick—*Epistemology of the Closet*

Some of these are difficult reading, but they are seminal works in Gender Studies. While they may be above the level of beginning students, I think if they are interested in gender at all, these works can start to build a vocabulary and introduce new ways of looking at culture and literature that can be very fruitful.