

From Fact to Fiction: Moby Dick: Teacher's Guide

Grade Level: 9-12

Curriculum Focus: Literature

Lesson Duration: Two class periods

Program Description

The sinking of the whale ship Essex was a well-known marine disaster in the 19th century, the event that influenced Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick*. Learn about the perils of the whaling industry, life on Nantucket, and the true account of a sperm whale that destroyed a ship.

Onscreen Questions

Part I— Before watching the video

- *Moby Dick* is a literary masterpiece. Discuss what you know about this work.
- Many consider it an allegory, or a tale that uses symbolic representation. As you watch the program, note the use of symbolism in *Moby Dick*.

Part I— After watching the video

- Discuss the significance of the whaling industry in 19th-century America and as a setting for *Moby Dick*. What were the economic and social opportunities available on whaling vessels?
- Why did one critic say that the Pequod represented "a ship of state"?

Part II— Before watching the video

- What works of fiction have you read that are based on actual events? Consider the ways in which writers incorporate details of history into their stories.
- As you learn about the fate of the whaling ship Essex, look for details that appear in Melville's novel *Moby Dick*.

Part II— After watching the video

- What themes does Melville explore in *Moby Dick*?
 - Was he writing primarily to teach about a historic event, to educate the reader about the whaling industry, or to show something about the human condition?
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Lesson Plan

Student Objectives

- Discuss what makes a hero tragic.
- Conduct a debate on whether Captain Ahab was a tragic hero.
- Reach a class decision about whether Captain Ahab fits the definition

Materials

- *From Fact to Fiction: Moby Dick* video and VCR
- Paper, pens, pencils
- Computer with Internet access
- Copies of *Moby Dick*, by Herman Melville

Procedures

1. Begin the lesson by explaining to students that they will debate whether Captain Ahab, the main character in *Moby Dick*, was a tragic hero. Then ask students if they know the definition of this term, which was first developed by Aristotle, a philosopher in ancient Greece. Write students' ideas on the chalkboard.
2. Based on these ideas, develop a class definition of tragic hero from the Greek definition developed by Aristotle. The definition should include the following points:
 - A tragic hero has a mixture of good and bad personality traits.
 - A tragic hero has one major flaw, which is the cause of his downfall.
 - A tragic hero has hubris, or an excessive amount of pride. Hubris also means that the individual is arrogant and is challenging the will of the Greek gods. The tragic hero's hubris usually causes his tragic fall.
 - The tragic hero usually goes on a journey.
 - The tragic hero is ordinary, someone whom most people can relate to.
 - The tragic hero almost always falls in the end
3. Have students learn more about the definition of a tragic hero by visiting the following Web sites:
 - <http://www3.cerritos.edu/fquaas/resources/English102/tragichero.htm>
 - <http://ancienthistory.about.com/library/weekly/aa111897b.htm>
 - <http://web.uvic.ca/shakespeare/Library/SLTnoframes/drama/greektragedy.html>
 - <http://www.ets.uidaho.edu/luschnig/GTC/1L.htm>
 - <http://www.teachtheteachers.org/projects/JZarro2/process2.html>



4. Divide students into two groups. Explain that one group will take the position that Captain Ahab was a tragic hero and the second group will take the opposite point of view. Remind students to use the definition of a tragic hero as a guide in developing their arguments.
5. Give students time in class to work on their debate. Suggest that those arguing that Captain Ahab was a tragic hero consider the following questions:
 - What was Captain Ahab's tragic flaw?
 - How does he display hubris?
 - What brings about his downfall?
6. The side arguing that Captain Ahab was not a tragic hero should consider these questions:
 - Why do you think that Captain Ahab does not have a tragic flaw?
 - Why do you think that he does not display hubris?
 - What kind of man do you think Captain Ahab was?
7. Hold the debate during the next class period. Have each side present a five-minute opening argument, followed by a rebuttal. Make sure their arguments include examples from the book. If students would like to present additional arguments, give them an opportunity to do so.
8. Conclude the lesson by reaching a class consensus about which side won the debate. Does the class think that Captain Ahab was a tragic hero? Why or why not? What evidence do students have to support their positions?

Assessment

Use the following three-point rubric to evaluate students' work during this lesson.

- **3 points:** Students participated actively in class discussions; worked closely with group members to develop strong arguments to support the group's position; documented their ideas with evidence from the book, the video, or both.
- **2 points:** Students participated in class discussions; worked somewhat closely with group members to develop satisfactory arguments to support the group's position; documented some of their ideas with evidence from the book, the video, or both.
- **1 point:** Students participated minimally in class discussions; did not work well with group members to develop arguments to support the group's position; did not document their ideas with evidence from the book, the video, or both.

Vocabulary

Aristotle

Definition: A Greek philosopher, educator, and scientist who lived from 384 to 322 B.C., considered one of the greatest thinkers of Western culture

Context: In his book *Poetics*, Aristotle explains his theory of a tragic hero and how tragedy affects the spectators watching it.



hubris

Definition: Arrogance or excessive pride; usually referring to humans trying to act like the Greek gods

Context: It can be argued that Captain Ahab displayed hubris in thinking he could conquer the great whale.

Herman Melville

Definition: An American writer who lived between 1819 and 1891; most well known for *Moby Dick*

Context: Misunderstood when it was published in 1851, *Moby Dick*, by Herman Melville, was not recognized as a masterpiece until the 20th century.

tragic hero

Definition: As defined by Aristotle, a man with good and bad characteristics who ultimately suffers a fall because of his own hubris

Context: Shakespeare's character Hamlet is considered a tragic hero: He undergoes a journey to discover the truth about his kingdom, but he's powerless to remedy the problem in any way short of death for himself and his surviving relatives.

tragic flaw

Definition: The one personality trait most responsible for a tragic hero's downfall

Context: Some literary critics think that Hamlet's tragic flaw was his inability to act until it was almost too late.

Academic Standards

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)

McREL's Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education addresses 14 content areas. To view the standards and benchmarks, visit <http://www.mcrel.org/>.

This lesson plan addresses the following national standards:

- Language Arts – Viewing: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media; Reading: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts; Listening and Speaking: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association have developed national standards to provide guidelines for teaching the English language arts. To view the standards online, go to <http://www.ncte.org/about/over/standards/110846.htm>

This lesson plan addresses the following NCTE standards:

- Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.



- Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and nonprint texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
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Support Materials

Develop custom worksheets, educational puzzles, online quizzes, and more with the free teaching tools offered on the Discoveryschool.com Web site. Create and print support materials, or save them to a Custom Classroom account for future use. To learn more, visit

- <http://school.discovery.com/teachingtools/teachingtools.html>

