Moby Dick: Life on a 19th Century Whaling Ship
Lesson Plan

**Grade Level:** 9-12  **Curriculum Focus:** Visual Arts  **Lesson Duration:** Two class periods

**Student Objectives**
- Research and write about life on a whaling ship in the form of an illustrated journal entry.

**Materials**
- Discovery School video on *unitedstreaming: Great Books: Moby-Dick*
  Search for this video by using the video title (or a portion of it) as the keyword.

  Selected clips that support this lesson plan:
  - Symbolism in "Moby Dick" (01:46)
  - Whales and the American Whaling Industry (02:03)
  - America in the Mid-19th Century: The Pequod as a "Little Democracy"

- History textbooks, books, other resources about 19th-century America, especially the whaling industry
- Published journals of Herman Melville (see Procedures)

**Procedures**

1. Ask students to describe the setting and the characters of *Moby-Dick*. Explain that Herman Melville based much of *Moby-Dick* and other adventures on what he saw for himself when he was at sea.

2. Tell students that, to gain insight into the setting, characters, and background of *Moby-Dick*, they will be doing their own research on the whaling trade in 19th-century America. Their first assignment is to research the whaling industry in New England in the early 1800s to better understand the daily life and challenges of the sailors and captains. They may wish to save or print out pictures from the era.

3. Then, based on their research, students should compose at least five journal entries from the point of view of an imaginary sailor or captain while he is out at sea on a whaling voyage. Here are some possible topics for students’ research, pictures and journal entries:
   - Information about the port of departure
• Information about the kind of men who signed on for whaling expeditions
• Information about regions to which the ship travels
• Information about how the crew spends its day waiting for whale sightings
• Information about a whale chase and kill

4. Another option you may give students is to use their research to write the journal entries from the point of view of a character from *Moby-Dick*, such as Starbuck, Stubb, or Flask.

5. To get the feel of what 19th-century journals sound like, suggest that students read some of Melville’s own entries. The following original sources in their latest editions will help:
   • *Journal of a Visit to London and the Continent*, edited by E.M. Metcalf (Harvard University Press, 1948)
   • *The Melville Log*, edited by Jay Leyda (Harcourt, 1951)
   • *Herman Melville: Cycle and Epicycle*, edited by E.M. Metcalf (Harvard University Press, 1953)

6. Remind students that their journal entries should include historical facts from their research. However, they should also include the feelings of the fictional journal writer, such as shifts in emotions over long periods at sea.

7. Have students to illustrate the journal entries with drawings sailors may have created during their voyages, such as sketches of ships, boats, and whales. Encourage them to examine the drawings and illustrations of the period and try to imitate their unique characteristics (often done in pencil, use of detail, etc.)

**Discussion Question**

1. What elements of *Moby-Dick* do you think made it a failure with audiences at the time it was published, yet make it highly regarded and popular today?

**Assessment**

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

- 3 points: Student’s journal contains at least five entries; includes many historical facts appropriate to the time and place of the written pieces; includes several references to the person’s emotions during the voyage; correct grammar, usage, and mechanics.

- 2 points: Student’s journal contains at least five entries; includes some historical facts appropriate to the time and place of the written pieces; includes some reference to the person’s emotions during the voyage; shows mostly correct grammar, usage, and mechanics.

- 1 point: Student’s journal contains less than five entries; does not include historical facts; does not include any reference to the person’s emotions during the voyage; shows significant errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics.
Vocabulary

allegory
Definition: A literary device in which fictional characters symbolically represent a moral or universal principle.
Context: Melville creates a cosmic allegory out of the unglamorous whaling industry.

idyllic
Definition: Pleasingly beautiful in a simplistic or natural way.
Context: Melville lived an idyllic childhood until the age of eleven, when his father fell deeply in debt and then unexpectedly died a year later.

nemesis
Definition: A formidable opponent bent on retribution or vengeance.
Context: For two days, Ahab tries to kill his nemesis, but Moby-Dick will not die.

premonition
Definition: Forewarning or presentiment of an event.
Context: Melville had a premonition that Moby-Dick would not be accepted by the American public.

unprecedented
Definition: Never having been done before; without precedent.
Context: It was a time of unprecedented change; the Industrial Revolution was transforming the American landscape.

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/compendium/browse.asp.

This lesson plan addresses the following national standards:

- Language Arts—Reading: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts.
- Arts—Art Connections: Understands connections among the various art forms and other disciplines.
- Arts—Visual Arts: Understands and applies media, techniques, and processes related to the visual arts.
• Behavioral Studies: Understands conflict, cooperation, and interdependence among individuals, groups, and institutions.

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](http://school.discovery.com/teachingtools/teachingtools.html)