

## In Praise of Herman Melville

*To The New York Times Saturday Review:*

Last Summer in London I read in THE NEW YORK TIMES SATURDAY REVIEW an article entitled "Read the Old Books." I cordially agree with Mr. Alden in his high estimate of the works of the late William Herman Melville, books almost unknown to the present generation, both in England and America. Mr. Alden pronounces him "the most original genius that America has produced." He had, however, a brother genius in Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose works are also more or less caviare to the general, swamped as we are by this overwhelming deluge of modern literature. It may be said that these two American authors had no precursors and have had no successors, and stand unique in English Literature. Like Melville, I have also in my youth had a brief experience in a merchant ship, a Yankee whaler, and an American man-of-war. As a sailor boy in the maintop of the United States ship Ohio I was fascinated by his "Typee," "Omoo," "White Jacket," and his weird "Moby Dick: or, the Whale." "Typee" is an enchanting idyll of the South Sea, and to the gospel truth of "White Jacket" (life in a man-of-war) I can personally testify, having served three years in the United States Navy, 1846-9.

In London I became acquainted with Mr. F. Bullen, the now well-known author of the "Cruise of the Cachalot." He had never heard of Melville. Such is fame. I sent him "Moby Dick," and he promptly informed me by letter that he had devoured it at a sitting, (all night;) that he felt after reading that astounding book like a duffer and discouraged about his own work. The weird romance that Melville has interwoven in that work he did not appreciate, but that is a matter of taste. Melville, like Turner, delighted in "color," and sometimes in lurid color.

Melville, I understand, deliberately effaced himself in his latter years and was naturally left severely alone, but I accidentally discovered him some years ago during my stay in New York, and, having much in common, we became good friends. Though a delightful talker when in the mood, he was abnormal, as most geniuses are, and had to be handled with care. He seemed to me to hold his work in small esteem, and discouraged my attempts to discuss them. "You know," he would say, "more about them than I do, I have forgotten them." He would give me no information about the old whaling tradition of the fiendish White-Whale ("Moby Dick,") which was said to haunt the sea about the Chiloe Islands, south of Valparaiso, and was almost offended when I inquired so curiously about his falling from the maintopgallant yard of the frigate – ("White Jacket") – a tour de force of writing, in my opinion. The first part of "Mardi" is also a lovely picture of these "Summer isles of Eden in dark purple spheres of sea." In his latter years he perpetrated some queer "poetry," which, like Walt Whitman's, Browning's, and Kipling's "Barrack Ballads," are not for the likes of me.

A line must be drawn somewhere.

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