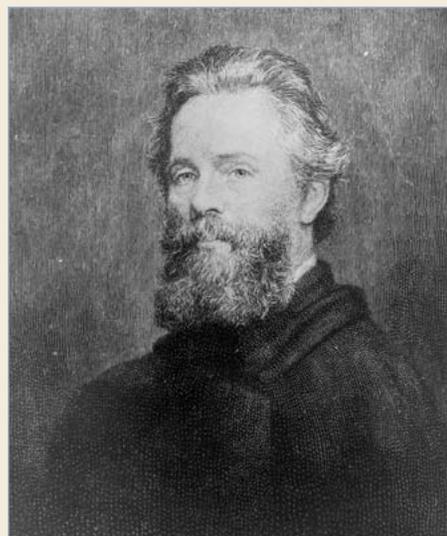


International Copyright Woes Helped Sink Herman Melville's Reputation in His Lifetime

JUDITH NIERMAN

New York City native Herman Melville (1819–91) was a rising American literary star until the 1851 publication in London and New York of his magnum opus *Moby-Dick* sank his reputation. The lack of international copyright cooperation played a large part in this sad outcome, which was not reversed until years after the author's death.

Melville began writing *Moby-Dick* in 1850 as an adventure story. However, late in the year he moved with his family to a farm called Arrowhead in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where he became friends with author Nathaniel Hawthorne. Scholars speculate about the effect of this literary relationship on the final form of *Moby-Dick*, which has Shakespearian, biblical, and intellectual overtones far beyond a simple adventure story. Andrew Delbanco, a noted Melville scholar, *called the novel* “the most ambitious book ever conceived by an American writer.”



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Herman Melville

Melville's plan was to publish his book first in London to secure English copyright and then, using printing plates made before the English publication, in America as soon as possible to secure American copyright. Because the two countries had no copyright reciprocity, authors were regularly pirated. (See “Piracy Inspires ‘Real’ Stage Version of Children’s Classic” in the *March 2010 issue of Copyright Notices*.) The English publisher Peter Bentley offered Melville 150 pounds and half the profits after all printing and

advertising costs were deducted. On October 18, 1851, the English version was published with a dedication to Hawthorne but without Melville's last-minute title change from *The Whale* to *Moby-Dick*. Unfortunately, Bentley's hastily produced edition was also an expurgated version, the victim of Victorian censors, and it was missing the all-important epilogue, which tells of the narrator Ishmael's survival after the annihilation of the ship, captain, and crew by the white whale. English reviewers savaged the volume in part because, as a first-person narrative, the narrator had to have survived the cataclysmic event at the end of the story to tell the tale.

The American version, including the epilogue, was published in New York on November 14, 1851, by Harper and Brothers. A deposit copy was received in the Library of Congress on November 19 of that year.

American readers and reviewers, at that time highly influenced by their English counterparts, gave the volume a poor critical reception. Sadly, the publication of one of the great American novels began its author's slide into obscurity, a process not reversed until decades after his death.

Melville earned only \$1,259.45 from *Moby-Dick* according to scholar G. Thomas Tanselle. Bentley printed just 500 copies. In America, only 3,215 copies were sold in Melville's lifetime, and the book was out of print when he died in 1891. The Chace Act, signed into law in March of that year, for the first time granted foreigners the ability to register their copyrights in the United States if their nation provided reciprocal recognition of U.S. citizens' copyrights. ©

Read more!

To read *Moby-Dick*, go to [Project Gutenberg](#).

To compare the American *Moby-Dick* and the British *The Whale*, go to the [Melville Electronic Library](#).



Arrowhead, where Melville wrote *Moby-Dick*

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