



Moby Dick by Herman Melville

Before reading

- 1 Ask students if they have heard of *Moby Dick*, but don't elicit any information about it. Students read *About the author* and find the other jobs mentioned. When you check answers, check that students understand what whaling is and establish that when Melville was a whaler, it was seen as a very good job, but by the time he wrote the story, it was not, due to overhunting of whales.

Answer

He worked as a sailor and on a whaling ship.

- 2 Students choose the correct option, then read *About the story* to check their answers. Elicit whether they think the story will be based on a real-life experience and, if so, how they know.

Answer

c

- 3 As a class, review what a tragedy is (a play or story where the hero or main character has a fatal flaw. The story has a tragic outcome, usually death). Students read *About the story* again to identify Ahab's fatal flaw.

Answer

his obsession with hunting the whale (at all costs)

i CULTURAL INFORMATION

Although *Moby Dick* is primarily an adventure story, or quest, it is influenced very heavily by the works of Shakespeare, which Melville had read just prior to writing it. In the original, much of the language is very 'Shakespearean' in style. It is also similar to a Greek or Shakespearean tragedy in that one of the protagonists, Ahab, has a 'fatal flaw' (his obsession with finding the whale) and there is a tragic outcome (almost everyone dies). As mentioned in *About the author*, whaling was a very profitable industry in the early to mid-19th century. Huge ships hunted whales for their meat and also for whale oil. However by the mid-19th century, whales had been hunted almost to extinction and that, coupled with the discovery of synthetic oil, led to a rapid decline in the whaling industry.

While reading

- 1 Students read the extract and decide if the statements are true or false. They correct the false statements.

Answers

- 1 True
- 2 True
- 3 True
- 4 False. His wife and child are back at home, on land.
- 5 False. Starbuck thinks Ahab is being hard on himself.
- 6 False. Ahab doesn't think he is any richer or better for being at sea.
- 7 True
- 8 True

- 2 Students read the extract again and answer the questions. There are no correct answers for some of the questions, although suggested answers are given.

Suggested answers

- 1 It is quite positive – the author does this by giving a description of the beautiful day (*clear blue morning, air was soft and warm, sun was high in the sky, etc.*).
- 2 It is quite reflective and sad – it changes as the text moves from describing the lovely day to Ahab's regrets and sadness about his life.
- 3 Captain Ahab
- 4 He feels sad and regretful: *dark thoughts, tear slowly rolled down his cheek, How much richer or better am I?, I won't let you risk your life.* He also feels reflective: *...his face softened* (implying he is remembering something).

- 3 Students answer the questions in pairs.

Answers

- 1 He regrets having to eat bad food when he could have eaten fresh food on land; he regrets the time he has spent away from his wife; he regrets the way he has chased the whale for so many years.
- 2 He is dreaming of being on land again, with his wife and child.
- 3 He has a twisted and knotted beard, deep brown skin, one leg, scarred face, gray hair, and is old and tired; simile describing Ahab: *eyes shining like two small fires*; another simile: *I've chased like a madman after whales.*
- 4 They are similar in that they both hate the whale; however Ahab's hatred is personal and he wants to kill the whale regardless of the danger. Starbuck would prefer to turn around and head home.

After reading

- 1 Students discuss their responses to the questions in small groups. When they have finished, elicit responses from groups around the class to see if students have similar ideas.
- 2 Students work in three groups with each group taking one of the three roles. Try to ensure there is the same number of students in each group, but if you can't, you can make the 'crew' group larger. Each group brainstorms arguments for continuing or turning back. Direct students to the list of arguments. They make notes in the space provided.
- 3 Students work in new groups of three, with one person in each role (you can have groups that have more than one ship's crew member if necessary). They role-play the conversation. Remind them they should try to reach a decision on whether to continue or turn back.