

StudySync Lesson Plan

Moby Dick

Objectives

1. Engage students in two excerpts from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, preparing them to discuss and write critical responses to these excerpts—with opportunity for extension to the full text.
2. Practice and reinforce the following Grades 11-12 ELA Common Core Standards for reading literature, writing, and speaking and listening:
 - **READING: INFORMATIONAL TEXT – RL.11-12.1-5, 7, 9-10**
 - **WRITING – W.11-12.1-7, 9-10**
 - **SPEAKING AND LISTENING – SL.11-12.1-6**

Time

140 minutes (with an additional 265 minutes of extension possibilities)

Materials

SyncTV Premium Lesson on Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*

Overview

One of the greatest and most seminal novels, *Moby Dick* tells the story of two iconic characters: Ishmael, a lonely young man who goes in search of adventure on a whaling ship, and his captain, Ahab, a monomaniacal one-legged seafarer who seeks revenge on the legendary white whale that maimed him. Published in 1851, Melville's novel was a groundbreaking pastiche of genres and themes: it explores issues of social class, religion, and man's powerlessness before the forces of nature—it even serves as an encyclopedic reference on both the failing 19th-century whaling industry and the zoology of whales. It has been studied as a novel of both literal and allegorical significance. It was poorly received in its time but has since risen to prominence as one of the important works in American literature. Students will read the beginning of Melville's *Moby Dick*, introducing them to Ishmael, the story's narrator. In describing his fascination and obsession with water, the opening chapter explores themes of alienation and sets the stage for the adventure to come. Then, students will read from one of the later chapters, as the crew prepares to chase after the mystical white whale at Ahab's behest. After carefully reading and analyzing the text, students will participate in class- and group-led discussions, and write critical responses consistent with the ELA Common Core Standards for Grades 11 and 12.

Background (10 minutes)

1. **Watch the Preview** (*SL.11-12.1-2*). As a group, watch the video preview of the premium lesson. After viewing, use the following questions to spur a discussion:
 - a. What do the words and images in this preview tell you about the excerpt you're about to read? What do you expect from *Moby Dick* based on this preview? What do the themes of *madness*, *obsession*, and *adventure* mean to you? Are there any other stories you've read wherein these themes play an important role?
 - b. As the preview states, the narrator is Ishmael—"a member of the crew on this fateful voyage" but not the focal point of the narrative itself. If Captain Ahab is the main character, why do you think someone else tells his story? Are there any other books you've read in which the narrator and the main character are two different people?
 - c. What do you imagine life at sea in the 19th century would have been like? What challenges and obstacles, both obvious and less-than-obvious. Have students imagine what life at sea would have been like for the crew of the *Pequod* and how they would have personally responded to the challenges at sea.

Extension (additional 75 minutes)

- d. **Research and Present** (*W.11-12.7 and SL.11-12.1-2, 4-5*). *Moby Dick* spans several different genres: it is, among other things, a fascinating document of the whaling industry in the nineteenth century. To give students a little historical context before they dive into reading, have them research this topic and bring to class three important facts about the whaling industry around this time. Students should incorporate images and other media wherever appropriate, and should present their facts to the class. Assess them based on the quality and insight of their research.
- e. **Personal Narrative** (*W.11-12.3-4*). *Moby Dick* is also a story about one man's obsession with a *monomaniacal* goal. Have students define this word, and after discussion, ask them to write a personal narrative of at least 300 words about a time in their lives when they were similarly obsessed with a singular pursuit. If students wish to tell their story in a more experimental fashion, encourage that too! Just make sure their desired medium of storytelling meets instructor approval. (Some potential ideas to consider: sharing their stories as a podcast, a self-interview, a comic book, a song or rap, and others.)
- f. **List** (*W.11-12.4 and SL.11-12.1*). Being as renowned as it is, most students will probably be familiar with certain aspects of *Moby Dick*. In class, ask students in pairs or small groups to write a list of things they already know about Melville's classic novel. Have them keep this list for their records, and once they are finished reading the excerpt in the following section, have them revise this list, correcting any misconceptions they had before reading.

Engaging the Text (130 minutes)

2. Read the Text (40 minutes)

- a. **Read and Annotate** (*RL.11-12.1-5, 9*). Have students read and annotate the introduction and excerpt. If your classroom is equipped with a projector, you might consider modeling proper annotating skills for students using the first paragraph of the excerpt. If students are completing as a homework assignment, ask them to write any questions they have into the annotation tool—these questions are visible

to you after the students submit their writing assignments or beforehand if you use the “Mimic” function to access the students’ accounts.

- b. **Discuss** (*SL.11-12.1, 3*). Have students get into small groups or pairs and briefly discuss the questions and inferences they had while reading.

Extension (additional 30 minutes)

- c. **Listen and Discuss** (*SL.11-12.1-2*). As a class, listen to the audio reading of the text. Ask students to share how their understanding of the text changed after listening. What additional images came to mind? What words did the author use to develop the setting?
- d. **Comprehend** (*RL.11-12.1-5, 9-10*). Have students complete the multiple-choice questions. Collect papers or discuss answers as a class.
- e. **Draw** (*ELL*). How do you picture the characters from the excerpt? Ask students to draw one of the principal characters from the two excerpts: Ishmael, Ahab, Starbuck, etc. Make sure they choose a character that is adequately described in the reading, and once they are finished with their illustrations, have students post their drawings to Instagram (or similar photo-sharing service) using a designated class hashtag. The drawing that gets the most likes wins!

3. Watch SyncTV (30 minutes)

- a. **Watch**. Either watch the SyncTV discussion as a class or ask students to watch it on their individual computers.
- b. **Focus** (*SL.11-12.1-3 and RL.11-12.1-2, 4*). Watch the section of the episode from 1:10-2:11, as the SyncTV students do a close reading of two passages from the excerpt. Your own students should pay attention to how the SyncTV students use both the content of Ishmael’s narration *and* the formal qualities of Melville’s prose to arrive at conclusions about the meaning of the text.
- c. **Focus** (*SL.11-12.1-3 and RL.11-12.1, 4*). From 2:53-3:56 the SyncTV students examine the various references to history and mythology in this excerpt from *Moby Dick*. Use this section as a model for engaging with the context and meaning of a fiction text by analyzing the allusions and references within.
- d. **Focus** (*SL.11-12.1-3 and RL.11-12.1*). Finally, from 6:37-7:35, the SyncTV students seek to derive meaning from the text by relating it to their own personal knowledge. This is a good example of better understanding a text by seeking to relate its characters’ thoughts and experiences to your own.
- e. **Discuss** (*SL.11-12.1-5 and RL.11-12.1-5, 9-10*). After watching the model discussion, have a conversation with the class about the ideas discussed in the SyncTV episode. What new thoughts do they have after hearing the students’ discussion? Next, divide students into small groups (3-4 students). Move around the room monitoring groups as students follow the SyncTV episode as a model to discuss some of the following questions:
 - i. What is the significance of the ocean as a setting in these two chapters from *Moby Dick*? Think of how the ocean is a “character” of its own in the text. What are its characteristics? How does it shape the story? How exactly does it play an integral role in the lives of the two main characters, Ishmael and Ahab?

- ii. Speaking of Ishmael and Ahab, what do we learn about them from these two excerpts? How are they different, and what obsessions and characteristics do they share? Compare and contrast the two characters using explicit details from the text as well as inferences of your own.
- iii. Think about the formal characteristics of the first chapter from *Moby Dick*. How would you describe Melville's prose in this chapter? What do you think of his style here and what might it add to the story? Why do you think Melville chose to begin this novel with this ode to the power of the sea?
- iv. Are Ishmael and Ahab relatable as characters, as the SyncTV students suggest? Though their goals and the time in which they live may differ from our own, can you find anything in common with these two men?
- v. How do you interpret Ishmael's line about "the ungraspable phantom of life"? What do you think he is figuratively referring to here, and what exactly is "the key to it all"? Closely analyze this passage from the text and offer your own varying interpretations.
- vi. What kind of picture of Moby Dick do Ahab and the crew paint? What kinds of words and anecdotes do they use to describe the great white whale, and how reliable do you believe their accounts are? Why do you think Moby Dick takes on such a mythical, larger-than-life state?

Extension (additional 80 minutes)

- f. **Journal** (*W.11-12.4, 9 and SL.11-12.4-5*). Either have students write a personal journal about daily life aboard the *Pequod* as they sail in search of the white whale—or, in pairs, have them record and share a podcast interview in which they pretend to be crew members, discussing life aboard the ship and the struggles they face. Regardless of the chosen format, make sure they engage with issues and characters discussed in the excerpt.
- g. **Compare and Present** (*W.11-12.4, 9 and SL.11-12.1-2, 4-5*). Place students in pairs or small groups and have them work on a chart or visual aid (e.g. Venn diagram) comparing and contrasting Ishmael and Captain Ahab as they are presented in the excerpts students have read. Allow students the freedom to use whatever kind of diagram they choose, but make sure to have them present their comparisons in a class discussion once they are complete.
- h. **Newspaper Article** (*W.11-12.3-4, 9*). Have students pretend they work for a nineteenth-century newspaper that is preparing a feature story on Captain Ahab's exploits. Students should write at least 300 words in the style of a newspaper article, describing this man and his experiences and what he seeks to accomplish. Articles may be in either prose format or call-and-response interview format. Encourage creativity in their responses!

4. Think (10 minutes)

- a. **Respond** (*W.11-12.1, 4*). Ask students to read the "Think" questions, watch the corresponding video clips, and respond to the questions, either in class or for homework.

5. Write (50 minutes)

- a. **Discuss** (*SL.11-12.1*). Read the prompt you have chosen for students, and then solicit questions regarding the prompt or the assignment expectations. Whichever prompt you have chosen, make sure you are clear about the assignment expectations and the rubric by which you and the other students will be evaluating them.
- b. **Organize** (*RL.11-12.1-5, 9-10 and W.11-12.1-2, 5*). Ask students to go back and annotate the text with the prompt in mind. They should be organizing their thoughts and the points they'll address in their writing as they make annotations. If you've worked on outlining or other organizational tools for writing, this is a good place to apply them.
- c. **Write** (*W.11-12.1-2, 4-6, 8-10*). Have students go through the writing process of planning, revising, editing, and publishing their writing responses.
- d. **Review** (*W.11-12.4-6*). Use the StudySync "Review" feature to have students complete one to two evaluations of their peers' work based on your chosen review rubric. Have the students look at and reflect upon the peer evaluations of their own writing. What might you do differently in a revision? How might you strengthen the writing and the ideas?

Extension (additional 80 minutes)

- e. **Write** (*W.11-12.1-2, 4-6, 9-10*). For homework, have students write an essay using one of the prompts you did not choose to do in class. Students should publish their responses online.
- f. **Re-Write** (*W.11-12.3-6, 9*). The story of *Moby Dick* is a timeless one. For a fun creative writing assignment, ask students to reimagine the plot and characters of *Moby Dick* in a modern setting. For example, instead of a nineteenth-century adventure on the high seas, make it about a manhunt for a notorious criminal or the search for a reclusive celebrity. Responses should be at least 300 words and assessed on the basis of both creativity and adherence to the themes and characters of Melville's original.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Key Vocabulary

1. circumambulate (v.) – To walk all the way around something
2. insular (adj.) – Of or bearing the characteristics of an island; isolated
3. reveries (n.) – States of being lost in thought
4. pedestrian (adj.) – Ordinary or commonplace
5. vehemently (adv.) – Aggressively, passionately
6. hypos (n.) – Most likely Melville’s shorthand for “hypochondrias” – extreme worries or concerns
7. countenance (n.) – Facial expression
8. nigh (adv.) – (archaic) Close
9. tarpaulin (n.) – A sheet of material used to cover things from water (short: tarp)
10. imprecations (n.) – Spoken curses, damnation
11. aft (adv.) – Behind; in naval terminology, towards the back of the ship
12. starboard (adj.) – In naval terminology, the right-hand side of something

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. The main reason Ishmael decides to set out to sea is because he is _____.
 - a. wanted by police
 - b. impoverished
 - c. unhappy
 - d. young
2. At the story’s beginning, Ishmael is _____.
 - a. living at sea
 - b. in Manhattan
 - c. an old man
 - d. in school
3. From the excerpt’s first paragraph we can infer that Ishmael is _____.
 - a. an orphan
 - b. immoral
 - c. introspective
 - d. violent
4. According to Ishmael, if you walk around a city such as his, you will find everyone _____.
 - a. committing various crimes
 - b. staring out at the ocean
 - c. staying indoors
 - d. trying to get on a boat to leave

5. All of Ishmael's anecdotes in paragraphs 2 – 6 are told for the purpose of _____.
- a. describing to the reader his deep love for the ocean
 - b. introducing the reader to his personal history
 - c. convincing the reader to go on a sea voyage
 - d. offering the reader evidence of mankind's affinity for water
6. In Ishmael's eyes, all of the following are offered as proof of the "power" of water over man EXCEPT _____.
- a. all city roads eventually lead to water
 - b. Niagara Falls is a popular tourist attraction
 - c. the common presence of water in art
 - d. most of the Earth is water
7. Ahab motivates the crew to join in pursuit of the white whale by _____.
- a. promising them their freedom
 - b. offering them gold
 - c. persuading them that this mission is necessary for their survival
 - d. not letting them return to shore

8. "Sing out for him!" was the impulsive rejoinder from a score of clubbed voices."

Using context clues, we can determine that the underlined word most closely means

- _____.
- a. approval
 - b. response
 - c. song
 - d. question

9. "Aye! Aye! It was that accursed white whale that razeed me; made a poor pegging lumber of me for ever and a day."

Using context clues, we can determine that the underlined word most closely means

- _____.
- a. insulted
 - b. haunted
 - c. cut down
 - d. mocked

10. From this excerpt from Chapter 36 we can infer that Ishmael _____.
- a. is a member of the ship's crew
 - b. knows the whereabouts of the whale
 - c. is a personal friend of Captain Ahab's
 - d. will die at sea

Answer Key

1. C
2. B
3. C
4. B
5. D
6. D
7. B
8. B
9. C
10. A

Further Assignments

1. After completing this StudySync Premium Lesson, have students read the entirety of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. Ask them to keep a reading journal as they progress through the novel and expand upon the themes and reading comprehension skills discussed in class. Assign a series of essay topics for students to respond to while reading, asking them to address the literal, allegorical and historical significance of Melville's novel. (RL.11-12.1-5, 9-10 and SL.11-12.1, 3)
2. The hybridization of genres and styles is an important tenet of *postmodernism*, a movement in the arts that is said to have begun in the latter half of the 20th century. What is *postmodernism*? In the first part of this assignment, ask students to research this movement, highlighting the basic tenets of postmodern works and providing influential examples of each. Afterwards, take these characteristics of postmodernism and consider the style and structure of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. In an essay response of at least 300 words, ask students to address the following question: Why was Melville's classic novel so ahead of its time, and in what ways? (W.11-12.2, 4, 7, 9 and RL.11-12.5, 9)
3. Students will find that one of the most memorable aspects of *Moby Dick* is the friendship that develops between Ishmael and Queequeg. In conjunction with reading the full text, ask students to write an essay response discussing the bond between Ishmael and Queequeg, using as a point of comparison an example of a friendship from their own lives that transcended language and culture. Questions to consider: How do people overcome divisions between race, social class, language, etc.? How does the setting of *Moby Dick* facilitate the friendship between these two characters, and how did the setting facilitate the connection in your own personal story? (W.11-12.2, 4, 9)
4. For further reading, have students read selections from—or the entirety of—*Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy. (Teachers should be advised of the violent content in *Blood Meridian* before assigning it to the class.) Having completed *Moby Dick*, students will recognize a number of parallels between the two novels. In an essay response of at least 300 words, ask students to address these parallels. How does McCarthy use *Moby Dick* as an inspiration for his own story? Which characters in *Blood Meridian* correspond to characters of *Moby Dick*? How does McCarthy interpret the mythology of Melville and make it his own? Do you think McCarthy's novel is a rip-off, or does he breathe new life into the story? (RL.11-12.7, 9 and W.11-12.2, 4, 9-10)

5. For a creative assignment, have students re-write the first chapter of *Moby Dick*—but in their new versions, have them tell the story from Captain Ahab's perspective. Encourage them to be creative—the story can begin anywhere, really—but make sure they are narrating a story that directly leads into the narrative of *Moby Dick*. In other words, their new versions do not need to begin with Captain Ahab losing his leg (though they may), but they must contain *some* relevance to the plot of the novel. (W.11-12.3-4, 9)
6. *Moby Dick* is a fairly difficult book for native speakers; English language learners may accordingly find the task of reading this classic novel to be overwhelming. Consider approaching it differently: assign each student a random page from *Moby Dick* and ask them to highlight all the unfamiliar words and phrases within, as well as the events taking place and the characters involved. Once they have done this, have them present their page to the class. Use this as a starting point to build comprehension of the text. (ELL)