

Moby-Dick

Music by Jake Heggie • Libretto by Gene Scheer
Based on Herman Melville's novel, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*

Study Guide to the Opera

Moby-Dick production photo by Cory Weaver for San Francisco Opera
<http://www.sfgate.com/performance/article/Moby-Dick-review-A-stirring-triumph-3939882.php#photo-3571976>



Moby-Dick: Real Whale or Allegory?

by Jill Leahy

Call me Ishmael. Arguably one of the most famous, or at least most iconic opening lines of any novel, this three-word sentence was the beginning of Herman Melville's 135-chapter novel named *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*, published in 1851. Nineteenth-century readers would have been familiar with the biblical character Ishmael, banished son of Abraham, who was condemned to wander in the desert for years. Melville based his book on the true-life story of the sinking of the whaler *Essex* in the South Pacific, a tragic tale of man against nature. The *Essex* was rammed repeatedly by an eighty-ton bull sperm whale and sank; the 20 crew members, in small whaleboats, succumbed to hunger, thirst, disease, fear, and eventually turned to cannibalism in order to survive. A showdown between Obsession and Reason. Certainly the stuff of Grand Opera, eh?

In 2005, Dallas Opera asked composer Jake Heggie to create a work for the opening of their new Winspear Opera House. In *Opera News*, Barry Singer wrote that playwright Terrence McNally, the librettist for Heggie's opera *Dead Man Walking*, was the one who suggested they create an opera of *Moby-Dick* for the Dallas project. Other opera companies joined Dallas Opera in commissioning the work: San Francisco Opera, Calgary Opera, San Diego Opera, and the State Opera of South Australia. When sickness forced McNally to withdraw from the project, Heggie engaged his longtime associate Gene Scheer to complete the libretto. The challenge was to trim Melville's lengthy novel without losing the essential soul of the work. Barry Singer noted that "*Moby-Dick* is that rare example of an opera collaboration where all hands have pulled as one. Scheer's libretto slashes Melville's sprawling, digressive fish-tale down to its riveting, character-driven, narrative essence. Heggie's score propels this raw, stripped-down story with lush, liquefied melodies that float ominously over savagely irregular rhythms." One doesn't need to read the book to be drawn to the story told in the opera, which premiered on April 30, 2010 at Dallas Opera.

Moby-Dick Synopsis

ACT I

Scenes 1 to 4.

Day One: The whaling ship Pequod has been at sea for one week

Captain Ahab stands alone on deck in the hours before dawn. Below deck, while most of the crew sleeps, the harpooneer Queequeg prays and wakes Greenhorn, a loner and newcomer to whaling. Dawn breaks and the call is made for "All Hands!" While the crew is raising the ship's sails, Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask talk about Ahab, whom no one has seen since the ship left Nantucket.



"Both jaws, like enormous shears, bit the craft completely in twain."
—Page 500.

Suddenly, Captain Ahab appears and tells them of Moby-Dick, the white whale that took off one of his legs. Then Ahab nails a gold doubloon to the mast and promises it to the man who first sights the white whale. This is the real reason they have sailed, he explains: to search the globe to find and destroy this one whale. His rousing call of "Death to Moby-Dick!" excites everyone but the first mate, Starbuck, who confronts Ahab about what he sees as a futile and blasphemous mission. As the sun begins to set, Ahab mourns that his obsession deprives him of any enjoyment of beauty. Starbuck, on deck, bemoans Ahab's madness.

Scenes 5 to 7. Day Two: Three months later

After three months without a single whale hunt, there are rising tensions among the crew and a dangerous racial fight erupts. Greenhorn sights a pod of whales and Starbuck persuades Ahab to let the men hunt. Starbuck and Stubb harpoon whales, but Flask's boat is capsized and Pip is lost at sea.

On board the Pequod, a whale is butchered and the oil rendered in the burning tryworks. Flask tells Starbuck that oil barrels are leaking. Starbuck goes to tell Ahab they must find a port for repairs but Ahab is unmoved by the report. When Starbuck refuses to leave, Ahab threatens him with a musket. Hearing shouts that Pip has been found, Ahab orders Starbuck out of the cabin.

Greenhorn describes how Queequeg rescued Pip and pleads with Starbuck to get help for Pip, who has gone mad. But, Starbuck ignores him and returns to Ahab's cabin, where the captain is asleep. Starbuck picks up the musket, contemplates killing Ahab, replaces the musket, and leaves the cabin.

Intermission

Characters

Captain Ahab *tenor*
Commander of the Pequod, an American from Nantucket

Greenhorn (Ishmael) *tenor*
A young American crewman on his first whaling ship voyage

Starbuck *baritone*
First Mate on the Pequod, a devout Quaker from Nantucket

Queequeg *bass-baritone*
A native of Kokovoko, harpooneer for Starbuck

Pip *soprano (breeches role)*
14-year-old African-American cabin boy from Tolland County, Connecticut

Stubb *baritone*
Second Mate on the Pequod, an American from Cape Cod

Flask *tenor*
Third Mate on the Pequod, an American from Martha's Vineyard

Captain Gardiner *baritone*
Captain of the whaleship Rachel

Tashtego *tenor*
A Gayhead Indian, harpooneer to Stubb

Daggoo *baritone*
An African, harpooneer to Flask

Nantucket Sailor *tenor*
Spanish Sailor *baritone*

Crew of the Pequod *male choir*
Many nationalities, ethnicities, and ages

ACT II

Scenes 1 to 3. Day Three: One year later

Despite an approaching storm, the crew sings a jolly work song. From the mastheads, Greenhorn and Queequeg talk of traveling together to his native island. Suddenly, Queequeg collapses. The crew gets him down and Ahab announces he will take the masthead watch himself, as he wants to sight Moby-Dick first.

Below deck, Queequeg tells Greenhorn that he is dying and asks that a coffin be built for him. The massive storm surrounds the Pequod. As Ahab sings defiantly to the heavens, bolts of lightning engulf the ship and the masts glow with St. Elmo's fire. Ahab demands that the men hold their posts, promising them the white flame is a sign from heaven to guide them to the white whale.

Scenes 4 to 7. Day Four: The next morning

The ship survives the storm. From afar, Gardiner, captain of the Rachel, calls out pleading for help to search for his 12-year-old son who was lost in the storm, but Ahab refuses. Pip shouts to Gardiner of the Pequod's own lost boy, cuts himself and gets blood on Ahab's clothes. Ahab orders the ship to sail on, contemplates the heartless God who devastates so many lives and baptizes his new harpoon with Pip's blood.

Ahab and Starbuck gaze over the horizon while Ahab describes his forty years at sea and all he has left behind. He sees in Starbuck's eye a human soul and it touches him deeply. Starbuck persuades Ahab that they should return to Nantucket.

Just as Ahab appears to relent, he sights Moby-Dick on the horizon. The whaleboats are lowered. Ahab looks again in Starbuck's eye and orders him to stay on board. The crew declares its loyalty to Ahab. During the chase, Moby-Dick destroys two whaleboats, drowning their crews. Then the whale rams and sinks the Pequod, killing all aboard. Ahab's boat is attacked and all but the captain jump or fall off. Finally alone with the white whale, Ahab cries out and stabs at Moby-Dick before being dragged down into the sea.

Epilogue: Many days later

Greenhorn floats on Queequeg's coffin, barely alive, softly singing his lost friend's prayer. Gardiner calls from afar, thinking he has at last found his missing son. Instead, he learns that Ahab and all the crew of the Pequod have drowned, except for this one survivor.



Meet the Composer

John ("Jake") Stephen Heggie (1961—) was born in West Palm Beach, Florida. He lost his father when

he was ten, and "found refuge" in music while a student at UCLA. Due to extensive practicing, he developed Focal hand dystonia, a neurological condition that caused his fingers to curl without control.

Withdrawing from music, Heggie took a job with the San Francisco Opera's PR department in 1994. Surrounded by singers, he began writing music again and gave some songs to mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade. She loved them, and became an active champion of Heggie's music. Not long after that, Lotfi Mansouri, then general manager of the San Francisco Opera, suggested that Heggie meet with the playwright Terrence McNally to discuss collaborating with him on a new opera. The rest is history—as well as being an unprecedented case of an impresario hiring his PR guy to write an opera.

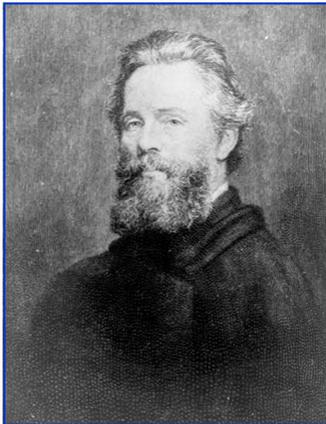
Jake Heggie has composed the operas *Dead Man Walking* (libretto by Terrence McNally), *Moby-Dick* (libretto by Gene Scheer), *It's A Wonderful Life* (Scheer), *Great Scott* (McNally), *Three Decembers* (Scheer), *To Hell and Back* (Scheer), *Out of Darkness: Two Remain* (Scheer), *At the Statue of Venus* (McNally), and *The Radio Hour: A Choral Opera* (Scheer). Heggie is currently at work on *If I Were You* (Scheer), based on the Faustian story by Julian Green, commissioned by the Merola Opera Program for 2019. He has also composed nearly 300 art songs, as well as concerti, chamber music, choral pieces, and orchestral works, including the Ahab Symphony.



Meet the Librettist

Gene Scheer (1958—) is an American songwriter, librettist, and lyricist. He was born in New York City and earned Bachelors and Masters degrees at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, followed by a scholarship to

the University of Cologne and an International Rotary Fellowship to study at the Hochschule für Musik in Vienna. Mr. Scheer's work is noted for its scope and versatility. He has collaborated on operas and many other projects with the composer Jake Heggie, including the lyric drama *To Hell and Back* and the song cycle *Camille Claudel: Into the Fire*. Scheer has also worked with composers Tobias Picker, Steven Stucky, Joby Talbot, Jennifer Higdon, as well as artists Wynton Marsalis and Ken Burns.



Meet the Author

Herman Melville (August 1, 1819—September 28, 1891), the third child of Allan and Maria Gansevoort Melvill's eight, was born into a socially connected New York family. His forebears had been among the Scottish and Dutch settlers of New York and had taken leading roles in the American Revolution and in the fiercely

competitive commercial and political life of the new country. To his socialite parents, young Herman did not fit their mold of a good, God-fearing, noble, and refined child. In 1826 Allan Melvill described his son as "backward in speech and somewhat slow in comprehension . . . of a docile and amiable disposition." After the collapse of the family's import business and his father's death in 1832, Herman's oldest brother, Gansevoort, took over his father's business and the family added the "e" to the family name. Herman worked as a bank clerk, on a farm, in the family business, and as a cabin boy on a merchant ship. During a voyage to the South Seas on the whaler *Acushnet*, Melville began to write of his adventures, ultimately writing *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*, *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas*, *Mardi*, *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile*, and *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*. Melville's last novel, *Billy Budd*, was never finished; the manuscript was found during the 1920s.

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