Classic American Novels on Film and Television, OLLI, Fall, 2023

Sept. 22: “Moby Dick,” 1956, Directed by John Huston, Screenplay: Ray Bradbury and John Huston, based on the 1851 novel by Herman Melville, Associate Producers: Jack clayton and Lee Katz, Producer: John Huston, Camera: Oswald Morris, Edited by Philip Sainton, Production Company, Moulin, Distributed by Warner Brothers, Budget: $4.5 million, Box Office: $5.2.

The Cast: Captain Ahab: Gregory Peck

Ishmael: Richard Basehart

Starbuck: Leo Genn

Captain Boomer: James Robertson Justice

Stubb: Harry Andrews

Manxman: Bernard Miles

Ship’s Carpenter: Noel Purcell

Daggoo: Edric Conner

Peleg: Mervyn Johns

Peter Coffin: Joseph Tomelty (voice dubbed by John Huston)

Captain Gardiner: Francis de Wolff

Bildad: Philip Sainton

Flask: Seamus Kelly

Queequeg: Friedrich von Ledebur

Father Mapple: Orson Welles

Pip the cabin boy: Tamba Allenby

Tashtego: Tom Clegg

(The Pequods were a Native American tribe which lived in what is now Connecticut.)

The real name of the “Pequod” in the movie was the “Moby Dick.” No kidding.)

Herman Melville, born 1819, led an exciting and unhappy life. He left school at age 15, and between 1839 and 1844, he was mainly on sea voyages, especially on a whaler to the South Seas. He deserted the whaler, and jumped ship from another voyage. His first 5 books, such as “Typee” and “Omoo” were mainly based on his life at sea, and they made him a popular author. In 1847, he moved to Massachusetts, and became a friend of Nathaniel Hawthorne, to whom he dedicated “Moby Dick” in 1851. “Moby Dick” baffled readers, and annoyed some reviewers, and the next novel “Pierre” (1852), was a failure. In 1853, a fire destroyed the plates of his books. He stopped writing prose, but he later published books of poems. Around 1866, he was appointed an outdoor customs inspector, a job in which he labored for 19 years. By the end of his life, he was unknown, and his passing in 1891 was unannounced. In 1924, a story called “Billy Budd” was published posthumously, and about that time, critics, such as D. H. Lawrence, began to restudy his work and a collected edition appeared in 12 volumes. There is now a Melville industry. “Moby Dick” is frequently thought of as the “Great American Novel.” It is an odd combination of whaling adventure, a compendium of information on whales and the whaling industry, and philosophical meditations on man and nature, good and evil, and metaphysical speculations in chapters like “On the Whiteness of the Whale.”

Famous Ahabs on the screen include John Barrymore (1926, silent and 1930, sound), Orson Welles in 1955, Peck in 1956, Patrick Stewart, miniseries 1998, William Hurt, miniseries 2011. John Barrymore’s version included Ahab’s romance with the daughter of Father Mapple. Hurt’s version includes a role for Ahab’s wife. Gregory Peck lived to play Father Mapple in a later version.

Huston’s movie began shooting in Wales, and parts of the film were shot near the island of Madeira and near the Canary Islands. Captain Alan Villiers commanded the ship for the film.

For the setting of New Bedford, Huston looked for a fishing village that had not changed much in 100 years. He found it if Youghal, Co. Cork, Ireland. You can see Paddy Linehan’s pub in the background. After the shooting the pub was quickly renamed “Moby Dick.”

The model for the “White Whale” was 75 feet long, weighed 12 tons and required 80 drums of compressed air and a hydraulic system to remain afloat. Unfortunately, the artificial whale came loose from its tow-line and drifted away in a fog, with Peck on board.

The ship used as the “Pequod” was built in 1887, and it had been used in a Disney version of “Treasure Island.” It burned in 1970.

Peck thought that, at the age of 38, he was too young to play Ahab. Later, he was hurt to learn that Huston had wanted to have Orson Welles play Ahab. Peck had a falling out with Huston, which never healed. Peck later became good friends with Anjelica Huston.

Ray Bradbury had told Huston about “Moby Dick”, “He had never been able to read the damned thing.” Bradbury and Huston had a stormy collaboration. Linehan’s pub must have been a lively place in the evenings after shooting.

The film was well received by critics, and has long achieved the status of a classic.

In the Bible, Ishmael is the first son of Abraham, the patriarch of Abrahamic religions, and the progenitor of Arabs.

Also in the Bible, Ahab is the 7th king of Israel, and considered wicked in that he condoned his wife Jezebel’s influence on religious policies. He lived from 935 BC to 852 BC. Naboth was killed by Jezebel so that Ahab could get Naboth’s vineyard.

The New England Whaling Fleet: From 203 ships in 1829, the fleet grew to 736 vessels in 1846. The crews of whaling vessels were racially integrated, but fights were common. The pay could be poor to nonexistent. Towards the end of the 19th century, wives, and sometimes children, of captains went on these two years voyages. The food must have been awful. Apparently, the whaling vessels carried a large supply of drinking water, which Ishmael, at least, found delicious. Whaling ships stopped at places like the Sandwich Islands (the Hawaiians) and there they pick up fresh food. But not Ahab.

Whale oil was highly regarded for lamps, but later replaced by kerosene. Some other whale products, like spermaceti, were highly prized. Candles made from spermaceti burned brightest.

Aristotle and Pliny in the ancient world claimed that whales were mammals and not fish. Not so the ordinary seamen of the Pequod. In the Harvard College library, the copy of “Moby Dick” was cataloged under “Cetology,” the Latin word for the study of whales.