



# African Culture and Melville's Art: The Creative Process in Benito Cereno and Moby-Dick

*Sterling Stuckey*

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## **African Culture and Melville's Art: The Creative Process in Benito Cereno and Moby-Dick** Sterling Stuckey

Although Herman Melville's masterworks *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno* have long been the subject of vigorous scholarly examination, the impact of African culture on these works has received surprisingly little critical attention. Presenting a groundbreaking reappraisal of these two powerful pieces of fiction, Sterling Stuckey reveals how African customs and rituals heavily influenced one of America's greatest novelists.

The Melville that emerges in this innovative, intertextual study is one profoundly shaped by the vibrant African-influenced music and dance culture of nineteenth-century America. Drawing on extensive research, Stuckey reveals how celebrations of African culture by black Americans, such as the Pinkster festival and the Ring Shout dance form, permeated Melville's environs during his formative years and found their way into his finest fiction. Also demonstrated is the extent to which the author of *Moby-Dick* is indebted to Frederick Douglass's depiction of music, especially the blues, in his classic slave narrative. Connections between Melville's work and African culture are also extended beyond America to the African continent itself. With readings of hitherto unexplored chapters in Delano's *Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres* and other nonfiction sources--such as Joseph Dupuis's *Journal of a Residence in Ashantee* -- Stuckey links *Benito Cereno* and *Moby-Dick* , pinpointing the sources from which Melville drew to fashion major characters that appear aboard both the *Pequod* and the *San Dominick* .

Combining inventive literary and historical analysis, Stuckey shows how myriad aspects of African culture coalesced to create the unique vision conveyed in *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno*. Ultimately, *African Culture and Melville's Art* provides a wealth of insight into the novelist's expressive power and the development of his distinct cross-cultural aesthetic.

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