

Homosexuality:  
History, Herman Melville, and Moby Dick

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There are many important figures throughout history that identify or are suspected to identify within the LGBTQA+ community; Homosexuality did not have a name for a long time, but it was not irregular. Some of the most famous and most notable LGBTQA+ icons include Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni, Leonardo Da Vinci, Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, Oscar Wilde, Keith Haring, Anderson Cooper (The Silver Fox), Andy Cohen, and many more. Through their art, writings, friends and family, and quotes, many historians believe these people are LGBTQA+ identifiers. Being LGBTQA+ is not, nor ever was, uncommon, and so Herman Melville can very well be LGBTQA+, too. When one begins to analyze Herman Melville's relationship to Nathaniel Hawthorne, it makes more sense that he would identify within the LGBTQA+ community. Herman Melville did not live an easy life. He often faced financial hardship, working as a banking clerk for a while to help support his family, then a teacher, then a shipmate, and eventually as a writer. Nathaniel Hawthorne, in contrast, lived comfortably and then lavishly after he became famous. The two met in the Berkshires and developed a fast friendship. Melville always exhibited a great admiration and love towards Hawthorne, and Hawthorne reciprocated the feeling of admiration and friendship. When Melville braved a more blatant flirtation in his later letters to Hawthorne, Hawthorne drew back and eventually cut off the friendship. However, during their time in the Berkshires, Melville wrote *Moby Dick*, a novel in which he uses his main characters, Ishmael and Queequeg, to mirror his relationship with Hawthorne. Unlike Melville and Hawthorne, however, Queequeg and Ishmael have a mutual love for one

another exhibited subtly throughout the novel.

The term homosexual was not coined until the late 19th century, but that does not mean LGBTQA+ people did not appear before that (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Though homosexuality did not have a name before, it was not uncommon. Many famous figures throughout the world and time identified as LGBTQA+. As already stated, many notable figures include, and are suspected to include, Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni, Leonardo Da Vinci, Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, Herman Melville, Oscar Wilde, Keith Haring, Anderson Cooper (The Silver Fox), Andy Cohen, and many more. There is a long history of gay, bisexual, transgender, and nonbinary presence throughout time. There were records of same-sex relationships from as far back as ancient Greece, where homosexual relationships were common, accepted, and often the subject of many paintings (GSAFE). Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni, better known simply as "Michelangelo", through poetry, quotes, and artwork, is suspected of being gay. He wrote many poems about how he was in love with his friend, nobleman Tommaso de' Cavalieri. Leonardo Da Vinci, another famous artist, painter, and drawer from Michelangelo's time was suspected of being gay or bisexual through the analysis of quotes and journals that he left behind. With traditional "fine art" artists like Leonardo Da Vinci and Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni, many famous authors/writers are also suspected (or openly) a part of the LGBTQA+ community. Some of the most notably suspected candidates include Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, Oscar Wilde, and most importantly, Herman

Melville (Brain Picking). Emily Dickinson is suspected of being a lesbian or bisexual. Analyzed by many notable groups, including John Hopkins University, it is said that Emily Dickinson's work was often, "sexually and erotically charged", and that it "[gives] rise to much ambiguity, both homosexual and heterosexual elements pervade her work." (Neither Lesbian nor Straight: Multiple Eroticisms in Emily Dickinson's Love Poetry). She wrote many letters to who was suspected to be her lover, Susan Gilbert: "Come with me this morning to the church within our hearts, where the bells are always ringing, and the preacher whose name is Love — shall intercede for us!" (The Life and Genius of Nathaniel Hawthorne). Virginia Woolf, as well, was suspected of being LGBTQA+. Woolf dedicated *Orlando* to Vita Sackville-West, who was likely her lover (Brain Picking). Oscar Wilde was gay, so openly so that he was put on trial. He was put on trial for "gross indecency" in 1895 after it was made public that he had affairs with a British aristocrat (History Magazine). At the time, homosexuality was a criminal offense in England. His lover, Lord Alfred ("Bosie") Douglas, in his 1890s poem "Two Loves" declared "I [homosexuality] am the love that dare not speak its name." (Britannica). Another notable figure, Keith Haring, was a famous gay artist in the 1970s/80s who worked extensively to raise awareness of the AIDS crisis. The history of the LGBTQA+ and subsequently violence against the community, as well, continue into the modern-day. For example, on June 12, 2016, Pulse, a gay dance club in Orlando, faced a mass shooting by a lone gunman. At least 49 died and another 50 were injured. It occurred during Pride week (APA). The event reinstated for the

community that we are living in historic times and still fighting for freedom as people who identify as LGBTQA+. In summary, being LGBTQA+ is not, nor ever was, uncommon, and so Herman Melville can very well be LGBTQA+, too.

It is already established that many famous authors during Herman Melville's time were, or were suspected of being, LGBTQA+. Herman Melville may be among them, as well. Through a thorough analysis of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville's relationship, one can conclude that Melville most definitely harbored very intense feelings towards Hawthorne. One can never know the true nature of their relationship since homosexuality was criminally punishable back then, and so no records were kept of any blatant relationships of the sexual kind. However, the interactions of Hawthorne and Melville positively had a homoerotic undertone. Melville began his life in New York City, where he was born in 1819. In the 1820s, Melville fell ill to scarlet fever. Although he soon recovered, his vision was permanently impaired by the illness. Melville's father was a successful merchant and importer, but he borrowed heavily to finance his business interests. For example, in 1830, the father moved the family to Albany to try his hand at the fur trade. The venture failed, dwindling their finances which then plummeted when the father died in 1832. The eldest son, Gansevoort, took over the family business of furs and caps. During this time Melville began working as a clerk at a bank to make ends meet. In the 1830s, Melville was enrolled in Albany Academy Classical School where he studied classical literature and began writing. This led to him becoming a teacher in Massachusetts, but he soon returned to New York City because he found

the work unfulfilling. The family business of furs and caps collapsed in 1837, making the family's finances even more dire. In hopes of getting a job in the Erie Canal Project, Melville moved to Lansingburgh, NY, and enrolled in Lansingburgh Academy to study surveying. His job endeavor was unsuccessful, and so he became a cabin boy in 1839 for a merchant ship called the Saint Lawrence. In 1841 he joined a whaling ship called the Acushnet. Melville went through many interesting events throughout the next three years on the seas, including being captured by cannibals and jailed for mutiny. He managed to return to Massachusetts on the USS United States. After that, he began writing books. First, *Typee*, then *Omoo*, and eventually the (now famous) *Moby Dick* (All from "Biography"). Throughout his life, Melville had mainly blue-collar jobs. Even though he was well educated, Melville and his family frequently struggled financially, falling from graceful middle-class to struggling to make ends meet.

Unlike Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne never struggled financially. Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in 1804 in Salem, Massachusetts. His father was a ship captain, and his mother was a woman named Elizabeth Manning. Both parents were descendants of seventeenth-century English settlers. In 1808, Hawthorne's father died of Yellow Fever. After, Elizabeth Manning took Hawthorne and his two sisters to live with her parents and eight unmarried siblings. Elizabeth Manning's father ran a stagecoach line and that stagecoach line supported the entire family comfortably. When Richard Manning, Elizabeth Manning's father, died in 1813, his son, Robert, took over the stagecoach line and acted as head of the family. That

same year, Nathaniel Hawthorne had a ball playing accident that left him out of commission for fourteen months. During these months, he immersed himself into the family literature, which likely started his love for reading and writing. In 1816, Elizabeth Manning moved Hawthorne and his two sisters to Raymond, Maine, where the family owned property. They lived there until 1819. The home in Raymond was like a paradise. Hawthorne was free to play and run around the beautiful river and foliage. Here he began one of his favorite hobbies: taking walks. Soon, his family called for him to return to Salem, Massachusetts to prepare for college. At this time Hawthorne resented his dependence on the Manning family and wanted to return to the home in Raymond. It was during these years where Hawthorne began to immerse himself into Gothic romances. From 1821 to 1825 he attended Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, where he met three of his lifelong friends: Horatio Bridge, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Franklin Pierce. Horatio Bridge would help arrange publication of Hawthorne's first book, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow would review Hawthorne's first book, and Franklin Pierce would become President of the United States and would appoint Hawthorne consul to Liverpool. Nathaniel Hawthorne described the next twelve years as lonely. He took frequent walks around New England and read hundreds of books in the Salem Athenaeum, and kept journals. In 1850, Nathaniel Hawthorne moved to Lexon, Massachusetts. When he moved here with his wife and children, he finally managed to escape the burden of his family. His ancestors, the Hathorne family (distinctively without the W, because Nathaniel Hawthorne had added the W later in his life to distance

himself from these ancestors) were heavily involved in the Salem witch trials, and, unlike other families involved, they never showed remorse or apologized for their actions. While in Lexon, Hawthorne wrote extensively and published many works, including *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys* as well as the famed Gothic novel, *The House of the Seven Gables*. During this time Hawthorne met Herman Melville, and Melville became Hawthorne's "ideal reader", writing appraisals of Hawthorne's works and calling him a literary genius. After, Nathaniel Hawthorne moved to West Newton, and then later to Concord. He remained friends with Herman Melville through letters and far and few in-between visits, but the friendship soon fizzled out and ended. In 1852, Hawthorne bought a house in Concord, Massachusetts, which was the only house Hawthorne ever bought or owned his entire life. That same year, Hawthorne wrote the campaign biography of Franklin Pierce, his old friend from college. Soon Pierce became president of the United States of America and appointed Hawthorne a four-year post as consul to Liverpool. Starting in July of 1853, Hawthorne and his family traveled to England, where they spent the next seven years. During this time, Hawthorne was a huge political advocate for the next four years (during his term), and he helped many people. Among other things, he loaned money, made speeches, lobbied to change inequitable maritime laws, and offered advice to improve the relationship between the United States and England. Having saved up a lot of money over his life, Hawthorne was about to travel for a prolonged period to Italy. In 1857, he and his family traveled to Rome as well as Florence for a few years, becoming integrated with a part of the large expatriate

community, which also contained famous sculptors and artists from the period. Nathaniel Hawthorne continued to keep a journal, where he spoke about the famous monuments and works of art that he saw during his time in Italy. In June, a few months later, Hawthorne and his family returned to England where Hawthorne published his final novel, *The Marble Faun*, in the winter of 1860. In June of 1860, Nathaniel Hawthorne returned to Concord with his family where he resumed (or attempted to resume) his career as a romancer. Despite his passion for writing, however, Hawthorne struggled to write, and he went through many drafts. He finished none of the work that he started during this time. The unfinished writings included "Dr. Grimshawe's Secret", "Septimius Felton", and "The Dolliver Romance". His artistic block may have also been caused because he was distraught by the threat of a Civil War taking place. Though he hoped it would not, the Civil War came. Nathaniel Hawthorne believed slavery was evil and hoped for a swift Union victory. Unfortunately, Hawthorne was not able to see the victory of the Union. Hawthorne died of unknown reasons, but it is recorded that in his final six months of life, Hawthorne's health deteriorated rapidly. On the 12th of May in 1864, Hawthorne left for Boston with Franklin Pierce with the intention of having a peaceful trip through New Hampshire. He died in his sleep in Plymouth, New Hampshire at age 59 (all from "American National Biography").

The relationship of Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne was mirrored by Melville in his portrayal of his two main characters in *Moby Dick*, Ishmael and Queequeg. Before this comparison is drawn, however, one must understand the

relationship between Melville and Hawthorne to truly see how it relates to Queequeg and Ishmael. We will never know if Hawthorne and Melville had a homoerotic relationship, but we do know that they both had a fascination with the other and inspired one another so vigorously that "Moby Dick" was written. Herman Melville met Nathaniel Hawthorne when Hawthorne was age forty-six, and Melville had freshly turned age thirty one. They met on August 5th in 1850 at a literary gathering in the Berkshires. At the time, Nathaniel Hawthorne was at the peak of his fame and in one of his post prolific periods as a writer. He had risen to fame about a decade earlier, as had Melville, whose debut novel put him on the map in his early twenties. They both lived in the Berkshires at the time, about six miles apart from the other, and frequently met. Apparently they would speak about anything and everything, from literature to questioning the nature of reality, time, and eternity. Many of the facts known from this time period are from the journals kept by Nathaniel Hawthorne and his wife, Sophia. Additionally, when both men eventually moved, they stayed in contact for a short while through letters. Not many survived, but those that did have interesting quotes that allude to the homoerotic relationship between the men. In one letter, Melville had said to Hawthorne: "The divine magnet is in you, and my magnet responds. Which is the biggest? A foolish question — they are One". Though Hawthorne demonstrated a close friendship to Melville, as a fellow artist, being inspired by Melville's enthusiasm and creativity, it seems that that is simply what Hawthorne felt: friendship. Hawthorne saw Melville as a fellow writer and friend, and when Melville

over exposed his feelings in one of his final letters, saying things like, "Your heartbeat in my ribs and mine in yours, and both in God's...", Hawthorne drastically pulled away, and their brief and intimate friendship came to a close. Melville, though, was infatuated from the beginning. Early on, before the two had met, Melville wrote a review of Hawthorne's short story collection, *Mosses from an Old Manse in Literary World* where he wrote that, "The soft ravishments of the man spun me round in a web of dreams." Melville even dedicated *Moby Dick*, a book he believed was his greatest work, to Hawthorne, "In Token of My Admiration for his Genius, This Book is Inscribed to Nathaniel [sic] Hawthorne." (All references from "The Life and Genius of Nathaniel Hawthorne"). In conclusion, Hawthorne saw Melville as a close friend, but Melville was infatuated with Hawthorne. So, was the relationship of Ishmael and Queequeg a reflection of the relationship of Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne? Or is it a reflection of Hawthorne and Melville's relationship if Melville's feelings were actually requited?

Herman Melville is mirrored in Ishmael, and Nathaniel Hawthorne is mirrored in Queequeg. Melville struggled throughout his life financially, while in contrast Nathaniel Hawthorne always lived comfortably, traveling and moving house when he pleased and never in financial burden, or any burden in general, really. Comparing Ishmael to Queequeg, Ishmael is educated. We know this, because early on, like Melville, Ishmael was a teacher. Like Ishmael, as well, he was on a whaling vessel as one of the lowest posts he could be. Additionally he is never shown to come from a high class family, whereas Queequeg is distinctively royalty

where he is from. Hawthorne was a descendant of immigrants and always lived upper middle class (or higher, when he became famous), whereas Melville was stuck middle class or lower class. Queequeg was well known and very well liked among the crew, paralleling Hawthorne again, who was an aching shy, brooding writer, previously called "handsomer than Lord Byron". Their living arrangements, too, mirror one another. When Ishmael and Queequeg moved into the inn and then the Pequod together, they began a very close relationship (marriage, actually), just as Melville and Hawthorne quickly became close living near each other in the Berkshires.

Ishmael and Queequeg are demonstrative of having a very close relationship. The first indication of this was very early on in the novel and early on in the relationship of Ishmael and Queequeg, when the two woke up cuddling. Ishmael was forced to sleep in the same bed as Queequeg because of limited space. When Ishmael awoke, he and Queequeg were cuddling like, as Ishmael phrased, "in the most loving and affectionate manner". In chapter 10, Ishmael and Queequeg share a tobacco pipe as they discuss a book together. After they finish smoking, Queequeg hugs Ishmael and says that they are now married. Ishmael, in his narration, explains that this means they are friends who would die for each other. However, in this chapter, Ishmael also describes Queequeg's appearance as, "large, deep eyes, fiery black and bold...He looked like a man who had never cringed and never had had a creditor...His forehead was drawn out in freer and brighter relief, and looked more expansive than it otherwise would... It reminded me of General

Washington's head, as seen in popular busts of him...", essentially calling Queequeg noble looking and handsome, so the marriage seems to be more meaningful than simply friendship bonding. Many people who argue in favor of homosexuality being present in *Moby Dick* also argue that Melville represents homosexuality through cannibalism. In his novel from 1994, "Lovers of Human Flesh: Homosexuality and Cannibalism in Melville's Novels", the author, Caleb Crain, states that cannibalism is a euphemism for homosexuality. It is further stated that this comparison is not far fetched, as during the time of writing, people of the South Pacific islands were known for cannibalism and same gender relationships. Queequeg and Ishmael, though tied by the cannibalistic/homoerotic association, also meld in intellect. Many times, Ishmael is surprised by the intellect displayed by Queequeg who, on the outside, is seen as a savage. When they board the *Pequod*, Queequeg and subsequently his relationship with Ishmael fades to the background to make room for other characters. However, towards the end of the novel Queequeg makes a resurfacing when he saves Ishmael from death even when he himself has died. As the *Pequod* sinks in chapter 135, the coffin, previously offered up by Queequeg to be a replacement buoy, is used by Ishmael. As Queequeg dies perched on the mass of the *Pequod*, Ishmael is saved by his coffin. Even in death, Queequeg is protecting Ishmael with what should be Queequeg's eternal resting place.

Herman Melville's relationship to Nathaniel Hawthorne was laden with homoerotic undertones. Melville was infatuated with Hawthorne, however Hawthorne did not reciprocate the more intimate love Melville felt. In his novel,

*Moby Dick*, Herman Melville projects his relationship with Nathaniel Hawthorne if those feelings were reciprocated. Ishmael is a projection of Melville, leading similar lives. They were both school teachers, then shiphands, and both had similar financial situations. Queequeg is a mirror of Hawthorne, a well liked, intelligent man. Melville wrote *Moby Dick* to mirror his relationship with Hawthorne. Unlike Melville and Hawthorne, however, the feelings between Queequeg and Ishmael are reciprocated.

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 Adapted with permission from Out of the Past: 400 Years of Lesbian and Gay History in America (Byard, E. 1997, [www.pbs.org/outofthepast](http://www.pbs.org/outofthepast)) with additions and updates from Bending the Mold: An Action Kit for Transgender Youth

(NYAC & Lambda Legal); The American Gay Rights Movement: A Timeline; Just the Facts about Sexual Orientation and Youth: A Primer for Principals, Educators, and School Personnel (Just the Facts Coalition). Additional materials and study guide by GSAFE ([www.gsafewi.org](http://www.gsafewi.org))

"A (VERY) BRIEF HISTORY OF LGBTQ ART AND SYMBOLISM." Revel & Riot.  
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