

## Assignment Discovery Lesson Plan From Fact to Fiction: Moby Dick

**Subject**  
Literature

**Grade level**  
9-12

**Duration**  
One or two class periods

**Objectives**  
Students will

- discuss what makes a hero tragic;
- conduct a debate on whether Captain Ahab was a tragic hero; and
- reach a class decision about whether Captain Ahab fits the definition.

**Materials**

- Paper, pens, pencils
- Computer with Internet access
- Copies of *Moby Dick*, by Herman Melville
- *From Fact to Fiction: Moby Dick* video and TV/VCR (optional)

**Procedures:**

1. Begin the lesson by explaining to students that they will debate whether Captain Ahab, the main character in *Moby Dick*, was a tragic hero. Then ask students if they know the definition of this term, which was first developed by Aristotle, a philosopher in ancient Greece. Write students' ideas on the chalkboard.
2. Based on these ideas, develop a class definition of tragic hero from the Greek definition developed by Aristotle. The definition should include the following points:
  - A tragic hero is a man who has a mixture of good and bad personality traits.
  - A tragic hero has one major flaw, which is the cause of his downfall.
  - A tragic hero has hubris, or an excessive amount of pride. Hubris also means that the individual is arrogant and is challenging the will of the Greek gods. The tragic hero's hubris usually causes his tragic fall.
  - The tragic hero usually goes on a journey.
  - The tragic hero is an ordinary man, someone whom most people can relate to.
  - The tragic hero almost always falls in the end.

Have students learn more about the definition of a tragic hero by visiting the following Web sites:

<http://www3.cerritos.edu/fquaas/resources/English102/tragichero.htm>  
<http://ancienthistory.about.com/library/weekly/aa111897b.htm>  
<http://web.uvic.ca/shakespeare/Library/SLTnoframes/drama/greektragedy.html>  
<http://www.ets.uidaho.edu/luschnig/GTC/1L.htm>  
<http://www.teachtheteachers.org/projects/JZarro2/process2.html>

3. Divide students into two groups. Explain that one group will take the position that Captain Ahab was a tragic hero and the second group will take the opposite point of view. Remind students to use the definition of a tragic hero as a guide in developing their arguments.
4. Give students time in class to work on their debate. Suggest that those arguing that Captain Ahab was a tragic hero consider the following questions:
  - What was Captain Ahab's tragic flaw?
  - How does he display hubris?
  - What brings about his downfall?
5. The side arguing that Captain Ahab was *not* a tragic hero should consider these questions:
  - Why do you think that Captain Ahab does not have a tragic flaw?
  - Why do you think that he does not display hubris?
  - What kind of man do you think Captain Ahab was?
6. Hold the debate during the next class period. Have each side present a five-minute opening argument, followed by a rebuttal. Make sure their arguments include examples from the book. If students would like to present additional arguments, give them an opportunity to do so.
7. Conclude the lesson by reaching a class consensus about which side won the debate. Does the class think that Captain Ahab was a tragic hero? Why or why not? What evidence do students have to support their positions?

### **Evaluation**

Use the following three-point rubric to evaluate students' work during this lesson.

**3 points:** Students participated actively in class discussions, worked closely with group members to develop strong arguments to support the group's position, and documented their ideas with evidence from the book, the video, or both.

**2 points:** Students participated in class discussions, worked somewhat closely with group members to develop satisfactory arguments to support the group's position, and documented some of their ideas with evidence from the book, the video, or both.

**1 point:** Students participated minimally in class discussions, did not work well with group members to develop arguments to support the group's position, and did not document their ideas with evidence from the book, the video, or both.

## Vocabulary

### Aristotle

**Definition:** A Greek philosopher, educator, and scientist who lived from 384 to 322 B.C., considered one of the greatest thinkers of Western culture

**Context:** In his book *Poetics*, Aristotle explains his theory of a tragic hero and how tragedy affects the spectators watching it.

### hubris

**Definition:** Arrogance or excessive pride; usually referring to humans trying to act like the Greek gods

**Context:** It can be argued that Captain Ahab displayed hubris in thinking he could conquer the great whale.

### Herman Melville

**Definition:** An American writer who lived between 1819 and 1891; most well known for *Moby Dick* and *Billy Budd*.

**Context:** Misunderstood when it was published in 1851, *Moby Dick*, by Herman Melville was not recognized as a masterpiece until the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### tragic hero

**Definition:** As defined by Aristotle, a man with good and bad characteristics who ultimately suffers a fall because of his own hubris

**Context:** Shakespeare's character Hamlet is considered a tragic hero: He undergoes a journey to discover the truth about his kingdom, but he's powerless to remedy the problem in any way short of death for himself and his surviving relatives.

### tragic flaw

**Definition:** The one personality trait most responsible for a tragic hero's downfall.

**Context:** Some literary critics think that Hamlet's tragic flaw was his inability to act until it was almost too late.

## National Standards

*The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has developed national standards to provide guidelines for teaching English language arts, with the goal of promoting literacy. To become a member of the NCTE, or to view the standards online, go to <http://www.ncte.org/standards/standards.shtml>*

This lesson plan addresses the following NCTE standards:

- Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
- Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and nonprint texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

## Credit

Marilyn Fenichel, education writer and editor