

Island of the Blue Dolphins
The Gam

Grade Level

High School: Ninth Grade through Twelfth Grade

Subject

Literacy and Language Arts, Social Studies

Common Core Standards

9–10.RL.1, 9–10.RL.2, 9–10.RL.4, 9–10.RH.4, 11–12.RL.1, 11–12.RL.9, 11–12.RH.9

Background Information

The goal of this lesson is to familiarize students with what life was like for many nineteenth-century sailors. These sailors often spent months at sea and engaged in all facets of maritime hunting and trade traveled along well-established water routes. When ships met along those routes, as well as in ports-of-call, news and information was exchanged. This lesson uses a passage from *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville to help students understand sailors' lives, how they got their news, and how they sent news back to the mainland.

Moby Dick

Considered by many to be the all-time greatest American novel, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* teaches us much about the nation's maritime history. Melville himself sailed on board the whaleship *Acushnet* in the early 1840s, shortly after the Nicoleño people, minus the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island, were relocated to San Pedro, the port serving Los Angeles. Melville's job title on the whaleboat was preventer-boatsteerer, which basically means that he was the back-up harpooner, the person who propelled a fishing hook, attached to a line, into the whale. Melville's experience as a whaler, combined with his astute observations and commanding literary skill, allowed him to create a fictional account of whaling that also became an important historical reference.

The Sea Otter Trade

The glossy coats of Pacific sea otter were an extremely valuable commodity in the 1700s and 1800s (eighteenth and nineteenth centuries). In fact, they have been called "soft gold" because they were considered so valuable. While a number of countries participated in the trade, it was dominated by Americans, who sent ships from maritime centers such as Boston, Philadelphia, and New York to the Northwest Coast (northern California into Alaska) and then exchanged most of the collected furs for goods in Canton, China.

American sailors acquired the valuable sea otter furs in a variety of ways, including trading for them with native hunters along the California and Pacific Northwest Coast and partnering with the Russian American Company (headquartered in Sitka, Alaska), who employed conscripted Native Alaska hunters to pursue the valuable sea otter in

Pacific waters. Smaller numbers of furs were acquired by American hunters going out on small ships and shooting otter themselves.

Examples of the latter two means of acquiring otter pelts intersect with the story of the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island, which was fictionalized in Scott O'Dell's famous children's novel *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. In 1814, the native inhabitants of San Nicolas Island, located about 60 miles off the coast of California, came into violent confrontation with Alaska Native (Kodiak Aluttiq) otter hunters brought to the island by the Russian American Company. The confrontation was devastating, and in 1835, all but one of the Nicoleños remaining on the island relocated to the California mainland. The woman who was left behind lived alone for eighteen years and became known as the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island. In 1853, she allowed herself to be taken to the California mainland by the American otter hunter George Nidever. Nidever and his crew used rifles and a small ship to hunt sea otter, whose population was by this point well in decline from overhunting. Otter hunting was just one of many of George Nidever's economic pursuits.

Much like whalers, the Nor'westmen engaged in the sea otter trade in the *early* part of the nineteenth century—the era of large scale hunting—did so far from home, and they were always hungry for news from the Atlantic coast. But news in the early nineteenth century didn't travel as swiftly as it does today. The transcontinental railroad, which connected the east and west coasts of the United States, wasn't completed until 1869, and a transcontinental railroad in Canada wasn't completed until a decade later. Telegraph lines expanded across the country *with* the railroad, so while the telegraph predated east-west rail lines, it didn't have extensive geographic reach. During the many years of Pacific whaling and otter hunting, then, news traveled across the United States (and between the United States and the rest of the world) primarily via ship. Gams (visits or friendly conversations at sea or ashore between sailors) were key to this process.

Materials

- Copy of the selected reading from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* for each student (provided)
- Access to a world map for each student
- Access to a computer with the internet for each student

Procedure

1. Prepare materials and familiarize yourself with the text.
2. Ask students to read the selected reading from *Moby-Dick*, or read it aloud as a class.
3. Ask students to answer the questions at the end of the selected reading.
4. After students have processed Melville's description of the Gam, ask them to apply what they have learned to the sea otter trade. Provide background information (see above, and texts for further reading, below) as well as access to a world map. Then, ask students the following question, first with a partner and then as a whole class:

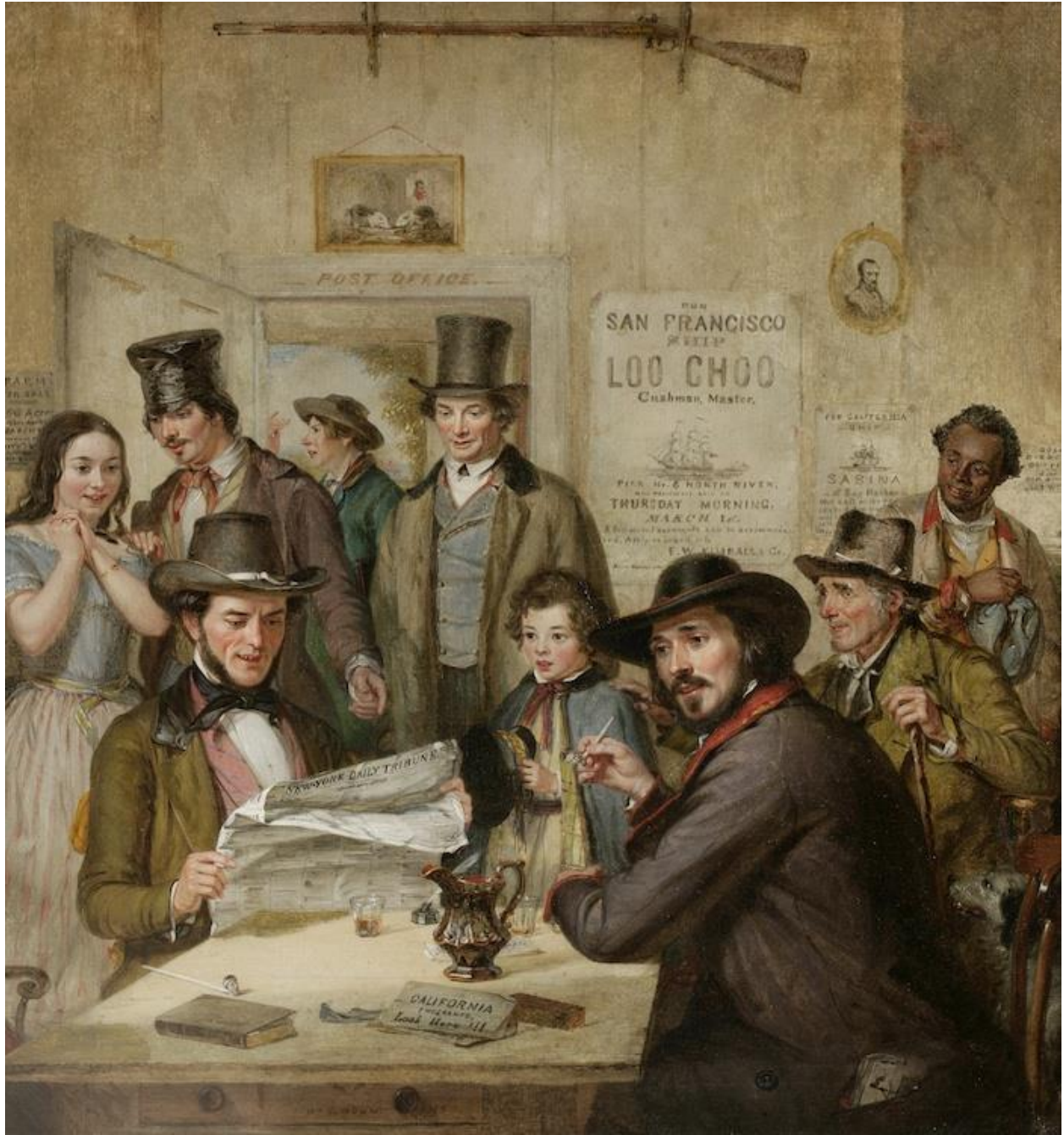
Do you think the practice of gamming occurred more or less frequently among sea otter hunters on the Pacific Northwest coast or among whalers traveling between New England and the Equatorial Pacific? Explain your reasoning.

5. Go to the Lone Woman and Last Indians digital archive, and select “search by document group.”
 - a. The very first article published about the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island was printed in Boston, not in California where the Lone Woman of San Nicolas lived. How do you think this happened?
 - b. Once the article, “A Female Crusoe,” was published in the *Boston Atlas*, what happened to the news story? How do you think it got from one location to another? How do you think the story made its way from the east coast of the United States back to the Pacific (Hawaii)? Provide a rationale for your answer. (As students might have guessed, newspaper editors exchanged papers by mail, and it was accepted practice to reprint news stories, with or without attribution. Newspapers were not covered by copyright law in the early nineteenth century. Ships outbound from New England and Mid-Atlantic ports would have carried current newspapers on board.)

Enrichment Activities

Examine the narrative painting *California News* by William Sidney Mount (available on next page and online through the Long Island Museum). This painting was created in 1850, after the California Gold Rush began. With the class, carefully study the image. Consider where the men and women in the painting are gathered and what role the newspaper and other print media play in telling the painting’s narrative.

Next, ask students to use artistic materials of their choice (e.g., pen and paper, paint and canvas, or a computer design program) to create an image titled *California News* that depicts the year 1820 rather than 1850. Students’ textbooks, resources from the school library, or the internet might be consulted for historical context.



William Sidney Mount (1807–1868), *California News*, 1850. Oil on canvas. 21 1/2 x 20 1/4 in. The Long Island Museum of American Art, History, and Carriages, Stony Brook, NY. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ward Melville, 1955. [0000.001.0014]. Used with permission.

Further Reading:

Moby-Dick by Herman Melville. [Complete e-text available free](#) of charge through Project Gutenberg.

[The Melville Society](#)

Daniel Walker Howe, "[Using Works of Art in Teaching American History](#)." The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, Teaching Resource. (Howe's essay includes a close reading of *California News*.)

Susan L. Morris, Glenn J. Farris, Steven J. Schwartz, Irina Vladi L. Wender, and Boris Dralyuk, "Murder, Massacre, and Mayhem on the California Coast, 1814–1815: Newly Translated Russian American Company Documents Reveal Company Concern over Violent Clashes," *Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology* 34, no. 1 (2014): 81–100.

Will Slauter, "Toward a History of Copyright for Periodical Writings: Examples from Nineteenth-Century America." In *Book Practices & Textual Itineraries: From Text(s) to Books(s): Studies in Production and Editorial Processes*, eds. Nathalie Collé, Monica Latham, and David Ten Eyck (Nancy, France: PUN: Presses Universitaires de Lorraine, 2014).

Name: _____

Selected Reading from *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville

CHAPTER 53. The Gam.

The ostensible reason why Ahab did not go on board of the whaler we had spoken was this: the wind and sea betokened storms. But even had this not been the case, he would not after all, perhaps, have boarded her—judging by his subsequent conduct on similar occasions—if so it had been that, by the process of hailing, he had obtained a negative answer to the question he put. For, as it eventually turned out, he cared not to consort, even for five minutes, with any stranger captain, except he could contribute some of that information he so absorbingly sought. But all this might remain inadequately estimated, were not something said here of the peculiar usages of whaling-vessels when meeting each other in foreign seas, and especially on a common cruising-ground.

If two strangers crossing the Pine Barrens in New York State, or the equally desolate Salisbury Plain in England; if casually encountering each other in such inhospitable wilds, these twain, for the life of them, cannot well avoid a mutual salutation; and stopping for a moment to interchange the news; and, perhaps, sitting down for a while and resting in concert: then, how much more natural that upon the illimitable Pine Barrens and Salisbury Plains of the sea, two whaling vessels descrying each other at the ends of the earth—off lone Fanning's Island, or the far away King's Mills; how much more natural, I say, that under such circumstances these ships should not only interchange hails, but come into still closer, more friendly and sociable contact. And especially would this seem to be a matter of course, in the case of vessels owned in one seaport, and whose captains, officers, and not a few of the men are personally known to each other; and consequently, have all sorts of dear domestic things to talk about.

For the long absent ship, the outward-bounder, perhaps, has letters on board; at any rate, she will be sure to let her have some papers of a date a year or two later than the last one on her blurred and thumb-worn files. And in return for that courtesy, the outward-bound ship would receive the latest whaling intelligence from the cruising-ground to which she may be destined, a thing of the utmost importance to her. And in degree, all this will hold true concerning whaling vessels crossing each other's track on the cruising-ground itself, even though they are equally long absent from home. For one of them may have received a transfer of letters from some third, and now far remote vessel; and some of those letters may be for the people of the ship she now meets. Besides, they would exchange the whaling news, and have an agreeable chat. For not only would they meet with all the sympathies of sailors, but likewise with all the peculiar congenialities arising from a common pursuit and mutually shared privations and perils.

Nor would difference of country make any very essential difference; that is, so long as both parties speak one language, as is the case with Americans and English. Though, to be sure, from the small number of English whalers, such meetings do not very often

occur, and when they do occur there is too apt to be a sort of shyness between them; for your Englishman is rather reserved, and your Yankee, he does not fancy that sort of thing in anybody but himself. Besides, the English whalers sometimes affect a kind of metropolitan superiority over the American whalers; regarding the long, lean Nantucketer, with his nondescript provincialisms, as a sort of sea-peasant. But where this superiority in the English whalemén does really consist, it would be hard to say, seeing that the Yankees in one day, collectively, kill more whales than all the English, collectively, in ten years. But this is a harmless little foible in the English whale-hunters, which the Nantucketer does not take much to heart; probably, because he knows that he has a few foibles himself.

So, then, we see that of all ships separately sailing the sea, the whalers have most reason to be sociable—and they are so. Whereas, some merchant ships crossing each other's wake in the mid-Atlantic, will oftentimes pass on without so much as a single word of recognition, mutually cutting each other on the high seas, like a brace of dandies in Broadway; and all the time indulging, perhaps, in finical criticism upon each other's rig. As for Men-of-War, when they chance to meet at sea, they first go through such a string of silly bowings and scrapings, such a ducking of ensigns, that there does not seem to be much right-down hearty good-will and brotherly love about it at all. As touching Slave-ships meeting, why, they are in such a prodigious hurry, they run away from each other as soon as possible. And as for Pirates, when they chance to cross each other's cross-bones, the first hail is—"How many skulls?"—the same way that whalers hail—"How many barrels?" And that question once answered, pirates straightway steer apart, for they are infernal villains on both sides, and don't like to see overmuch of each other's villainous likenesses.

But look at the godly, honest, unostentatious, hospitable, sociable, free-and-easy whaler! What does the whaler do when she meets another whaler in any sort of decent weather? She has a "*Gam*," a thing so utterly unknown to all other ships that they never heard of the name even; and if by chance they should hear of it, they only grin at it, and repeat gamesome stuff about "spouters" and "blubber-boilers," and such like pretty exclamations. Why it is that all Merchant-seamen, and also all Pirates and Man-of-War's men, and Slave-ship sailors, cherish such a scornful feeling towards Whale-ships; this is a question it would be hard to answer. Because, in the case of pirates, say, I should like to know whether that profession of theirs has any peculiar glory about it. It sometimes ends in uncommon elevation, indeed; but only at the gallows. And besides, when a man is elevated in that odd fashion, he has no proper foundation for his superior altitude. Hence, I conclude, that in boasting himself to be high lifted above a whaler, in that assertion the pirate has no solid basis to stand on.

But what is a *Gam*? You might wear out your index-finger running up and down the columns of dictionaries, and never find the word. Dr. Johnson never attained to that erudition; Noah Webster's ark does not hold it. Nevertheless, this same expressive word has now for many years been in constant use among some fifteen thousand true born Yankees. Certainly, it needs a definition, and should be incorporated into the Lexicon. With that view, let me learnedly define it.

GAM. NOUN—*A social meeting of two (or more) Whaleships, generally on a cruising-ground; when, after exchanging hails, they exchange visits by boats' crews; the two captains remaining, for the time, on board of one ship, and the two chief mates on the other.*

There is another little item about Gamming which must not be forgotten here. All professions have their own little peculiarities of detail; so has the whale fishery. In a pirate, man-of-war, or slave ship, when the captain is rowed anywhere in his boat, he always sits in the stern sheets on a comfortable, sometimes cushioned seat there, and often steers himself with a pretty little milliner's tiller decorated with gay cords and ribbons. But the whale-boat has no seat astern, no sofa of that sort whatever, and no tiller at all. High times indeed, if whaling captains were wheeled about the water on castors like gouty old aldermen in patent chairs. And as for a tiller, the whale-boat never admits of any such effeminacy; and therefore as in gamming a complete boat's crew must leave the ship, and hence as the boat steerer or harpooneer is of the number, that subordinate is the steersman upon the occasion, and the captain, having no place to sit in, is pulled off to his visit all standing like a pine tree. And often you will notice that being conscious of the eyes of the whole visible world resting on him from the sides of the two ships, this standing captain is all alive to the importance of sustaining his dignity by maintaining his legs. Nor is this any very easy matter; for in his rear is the immense projecting steering oar hitting him now and then in the small of his back, the after-oar reciprocating by rapping his knees in front. He is thus completely wedged before and behind, and can only expand himself sideways by settling down on his stretched legs; but a sudden, violent pitch of the boat will often go far to topple him, because length of foundation is nothing without corresponding breadth. Merely make a spread angle of two poles, and you cannot stand them up. Then, again, it would never do in plain sight of the world's riveted eyes, it would never do, I say, for this straddling captain to be seen steadying himself the slightest particle by catching hold of anything with his hands; indeed, as token of his entire, buoyant self-command, he generally carries his hands in his trowsers' pockets; but perhaps being generally very large, heavy hands, he carries them there for ballast. Nevertheless there have occurred instances, well authenticated ones too, where the captain has been known for an uncommonly critical moment or two, in a sudden squall say—to seize hold of the nearest oarsman's hair, and hold on there like grim death.

Source: Project Gutenberg (<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2701/2701-h/2701-h.htm#link2HCH0053>)

Questions

1. What happens during a gam? Describe the activities of officers and crew.
2. How did sailors feel about gams? Why? Be sure to cite textual evidence.
3. After a gam, what would each participating party have gained as a result of the interaction?
4. What kind of news do you think American sailors might have exchanged at sea during the era of Pacific whaling (the decades before the Civil War)?
5. Do you think gams occurred more frequently at sea or at port? Explain your reasoning.