

The Encantadas or Enchanted Isles

These ten "sketches" encompass natural history, adventure and true accounts which read like legend, all arising from Melville's actual journey to the Galapagos Islands off the coast of Ecuador in the year 1841. The descriptive writing is precise and evocative, almost filmic in its images and in its ability to convey the sweep of the islands and the minute details of the fascinating creatures who inhabit them—giant tortoises, pelicans, an abandoned widow, and a renegade Creole, an evil creature who tyrannized slaves and sailors and was known as King Oberlus until his capture. The forbidding terrain of each of the islands, which few sailors dared to visit, is set down for the reader's edification and delight.

Questions for Discussion/ Comprehension

Sketch First: *The Isles at Large*

1. Describe The Encantadas and their special course.
2. Note the geography, flora, and fauna of the Galapagos Islands as Melville here describes them. Consult an encyclopedia or natural history of the region and compare Melville's descriptions to them. How astute an observer was Melville?

Sketch Second: *Two Sides of a Tortoise*

1. Describe the tortoises Melville observes. What feelings do these creatures inspire in him?
2. What do Melville and his shipmates do with them? What other cultures show this kind of reverence for the creatures they eat?

Sketch Third: *Rock Rodondo*

1. What does "rock rodondo" mean? What kinds of birds does Melville discover in this area of the islands? Describe them.

Sketch Fourth: *A Pisgah View from the Rock*

1. From what perspective does Melville view the islands? What year was this written in? If Melville were writing about this in the present, how might he describe his perspective?
2. Locate the Galapagos Islands on a map using the information Melville provides in this chapter. How accurate are his descriptions? Have the islands' characteristics changed since the period in which Melville visited them? (consult a current natural history or almanac for this)

Sketch Fifth: *The Frigate And Ship 'Flyaway'*

1. Research the three "eyewitness authorities" mentioned in this sketch. Compare their account of the islands to Melville's. What was the mariners' objective in sailing to the Galapagos?

Sketch Sixth: *Barrington Isle and the Buccaneers*

1. Who were the West Indian Buccaneers? What was their reputed relation to the islands?
2. What does Melville speculate on the kind of lives they lived?

Sketch Seventh: *Charles's Isle and the Dog-King*

1. What became of Charles's Isle? How was its population established? Why is it a place for sailors to avoid?

Sketch Eighth: *Norfolks Isle and the Chola Widow*

1. What does Melville discover here? What ordeal had Hunilla passed? How had she survived?

Sketch Ninth: *Hood's Isle and the Hermit Oberlus*

1. Who was Oberlus and how had he survived on the island?
2. What happens to Oberlus when he tries to take a slave? How does he approach strangers thereafter?
3. What adventures does Oberlus succeed in, and how does he end his days?
4. How does Melville let the reader know this amazing story is based on fact?

Literature Analysis

Select two specific aspects of the islands. Read over the passages in which Melville describes them and copy the phrases he uses to enable the reader to see them clearly, in all their concrete particulars. How do you think Melville was able to describe what he saw so well? What kind of attention is necessary when an individual wants to relate the details of an object or a place so that the reader can see what the writer sees? Select a place that you know well and focus on one of its aspects. Write two or more paragraphs using the kind of precise language Melville uses in *The Encantadas* to convey what it is that you see.