



0. HOW WHALE BLUBBER BECOMES OIL - Story Preface

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This illustration, produced by Currier & Ives sometime between 1856 and 1907, depicts (in the foreground) whalers in an open boat hunting a [Right Whale](#). We see the main whale ship (in the background) where crew members are transforming whale blubber into whale oil. That process, which produces thick black smoke, is called "trying-out." Public-domain image online via the Library of Congress. Click on it for a much-better view.

Transforming whale blubber into usable oil involves a process called "trying out." Whalers filled two enormous, four-barreled "try pots" with pieces of blubber to melt it down.

Before that could happen, however, crew members had to chop the original twenty-foot blubber strips into square-foot hunks—around an inch thick—which they could handle (and which would fit into the try pots).

A whale's blubber is not like the soft and flabby fat of a steak. It's tough and really hard to cut, so whalers used special tools (which they had to keep sharpening).

When the pieces of blubber were ready for the try pots, they looked like the fanned pages of a book. Whalers called them "Bible Leaves."

To melt the blubber, the whalers needed heat. A wood fire started the trying-out process. Then parts of the whale itself were used to keep the fires burning.

The flames melted the blubber and produced thick, black smoke which smelled really awful. The men learned it was best to keep wearing their same smelly clothes throughout the trying-out process. Better to "stink-up" the same set of clothes than to keep ruining their limited garment supplies.

Trying-out could take as long as three days, with the work never getting easier or the smell getting better. At the end of the process, whalers had the oil to fill the casks in the ship's cargo hold.

When she left Nantucket, *Essex* had around 1200 barrels for her crew to fill. Every barrel held between 30-35 gallons of oil. If she were fully loaded, the *Essex* could carry roughly 42,000 gallons of oil back to her home island.

In today's world, that amount of gasoline would fill-up the 17-gallon gas tank—of a Toyota Camry, for example—about 2,471 times.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/HOW-WHALE-BLUBBER-BECOMES-OIL-In-the-Heart-of-the-Sea-The-Tragedy-of-the-Whaleship-Essex>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/HOW-WHALE-BLUBBER-BECOMES-OIL-In-the-Heart-of-the-Sea-The-Tragedy-of-the-Whaleship-Essex>

Media Stream



Transforming Whale Blubber into Oil via Trying-Out

Library of Congress picture LC-USZC2-1759; image—entitled "Whale Fishery - Attacking a Right Whale"—by Currier & Ives, published sometime between 1856 and 1907.

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