


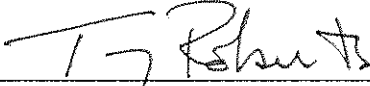
## **Ishmael as Guide to the Reader in the Hunt for the Great White Whale**

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*Moby Dick* is likely Herman Melville's best known work; aptly named a "Great American Novel," it is a complex work of literature. It has been discussed in hundreds of scholarly circles, and different interpretations have been argued through various periods of the novel's popularity. *Moby Dick* or *The Whale* was originally published in 1851, and at that time it was not well received. Perhaps Melville's audience was hoping for another novel similar to his early works like *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*, full of sensation and romance. Melville's true desire, however, was to write a philosophical work that challenged the mind more than a simple romance. Many of Melville's early works like *Typee* and *Omoo* were largely popular for their narrative rather than for a more profound message that Melville was trying to assert. Two years before publishing *Moby Dick*, Melville himself wrote, "So far as I am individually concerned, & independent of my pocket, it is my earnest desire to write those sorts of books which are said to 'fail'" (Brodhead, 5), meaning that he was not concerned with writing narratives that catered to what the public viewed as exciting. With *Moby Dick*, Melville constructed a romantic framework for the philosophical aspects of his novel, hoping to appease some of his readers and thus still sell the book. Unfortunately, *Moby Dick* did not take off with his main audience as much as Melville had hoped, and it was not until nearer the end of his life that his work began to be better understood by a new generation of readers, and he saw a glimpse of the recognition he would continue to receive in coming decades as the book gained popularity.

Scholars agree that *Moby Dick* is a prime example of the rhetorical use of allegory, and that this results in the novel having many layers of interpretation. The famous Ishmael, narrator of the story, guides the reader through these layers and occasionally steps outside of the narrative to examine the characters, their relationships, and the events described in the novel. Melville

sought to write a novel to engage the reader in a philosophical discussion, so he created Ishmael to give the reader direction and to even bond with the reader in a manner so that they become one and the same, and thus Ishmael, as proto-reader, is the main character of *Moby Dick*. This bond with the reader draws the reader in and provides the reader with a unique approach to narrative.

The character Ishmael narrates the story of the whaling ship known as the *Pequod* on what will turn out to be her final voyage out to sea. The crew set out on a whaling voyage like any other, seeking to collect as many barrels of whale oil as they can in the subsequent three years, and return home for the profit. Soon after the vessel leaves Nantucket, however, it becomes apparent that the mysterious one-legged Captain, Ahab, intends to lead the crew on an insane revenge journey to hunt down Moby Dick, the whale that took the Captain's leg on a previous voyage. Moby Dick, the White Whale, is rumored to be a supernatural force roaming the seas of the world with a conscious vengeance toward all whaling ships. Melville uses the story of Ahab and his ubiquitous whale enemy as the skeletal frame on which to build the muscles and nervous system of the novel. After his failure with the novel *Mardi*, Melville realized that his audience would not accept a novel without this sort of narrative framework. He also realized that what his readers needed was a way to connect to the novel, and he created Ishmael for the express purpose to act as guide to the reader. Ishmael is a relatable narrator, and draws the reader into the story by balancing a certain level of transparency with a counteracting level of mystery.

At times, Ishmael is the focus of the novel, speaking directly to the reader about events or relaying his personal thoughts and interpretations. At other times, Ishmael is present as a

character among the other characters of the story, as a player in the events of the narrative. Yet at other times, Ishmael recedes to the background; although he is still the speaker, he ceases to refer to himself for entire chapters and lets the events unfold undisturbed. Ishmael's presence, when he is actually present, provides the reader with the knowledge needed to understand Ishmael's brand of philosophical thought. Ishmael as a narrator speaking directly to the reader is far more present in the novel than Ishmael the character who is part of the action, emphasizing Ishmael's closeness to the reader. This not only strengthens the bond that forms between narrator and reader, but also brings Ishmael more outside of the narrative than within it. In the beginning of the novel, Ishmael's presence is very strong, but as the novel goes on Ishmael brings less attention to himself, leaving the reader without commentary.

*Moby Dick* is not a simple work, and there are countless themes in it to be examined and countless ways to understand it in the context of its own time as well as to examine it with a modern lens and to find ways in which it still speaks to contemporary American life. Scholars have put forth many interpretations of the novel, including many discussions of Melville's crafting of the characters of *Moby Dick* and his use of perspective. Although a number of the characters, such as Ahab, Queequeg, Starbuck, or even Pip, are crucial to the plot as well as to the main ideas of the novel as a whole, Ishmael is central to everything about *Moby Dick* because Ishmael is the one who interprets the story for the reader. Ishmael, alone, survives the wreckage of the *Pequod* and lives on, and it is only through him that the reader accesses the story.

The narrator introduces himself with the famous line, "Call me Ishmael" (Melville, 3), speaking directly to the reader and establishing a comfortable, first name basis. This short opening sentence has been the subject of much analysis by scholars. In saying "call me" rather

than “my name is,” or something similar, Ishmael implies to the reader that Ishmael may not be his given name. This further implies that he chose the name Ishmael to represent his character as he sees himself fitting into the drama, thereby proving that Ishmael has some level of thematic agency over the story, and will be projecting his own sentiments on the narrative. The opening immediately lays a framework for the novel, and creates an intimacy with the reader from the beginning.

Melville uses a number of methods to help the reader relate to Ishmael. For example, despite the seriousness of the novel and the philosophical intensity of the themes, Ishmael is quite funny. In the opening chapter, “Loomings,” Ishmael shows a vulnerability by describing relatable feelings of existential anxieties, and he light heartedly adds, “My hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people’s hats off,” (Melville, 3). Not only is his restlessness and resulting recklessness a mood that many readers will themselves remember having experienced, but he is able to be playful about it and joke about picking fights, drawing the reader in with a laugh at the very beginning. He continues his introduction by explaining that he always goes to sea as a sailor because, among other reasons, that way he gets paid for his trouble. He points out that, on the contrary, passengers, instead of getting paid, actually pay to go to sea, and therefore lose money. This passage is generally meant to be amusing, and does succeed, yet he throws in some playful philosophy before moving on. On the subject of being paid, he says, “The urbane activity with which a man receives money is really marvellous, considering that we so earnestly believe money to be the root of all earthly ills, and that on no account can a monied man enter heaven. Ah! How cheerfully we consign ourselves to

perdition!” (Melville, 6). While continuing to joke around, Ishmael is also introducing his philosophical side, a side that the reader will become much better acquainted with throughout the novel.

So Ishmael entices the reader with a relatable attitude toward life, even to a modern day reader. Creating a positive interaction with the reader in this way, Ishmael goes on to show himself to be a reliable scholar and a philosopher. Once Ishmael has sufficiently introduced himself and the cast of characters as needed, he begins to show the reader his brand of philosophy and indicates to the reader how aspects of the narrative can be viewed through a philosophical lens, as opposed to only at face value. Ishmael provides the reader with a guide for this sort of critical reading that nudges the reader to consider the text the way that Melville intended. When Ishmael is not immediately providing this kind of support for the reader, he removes himself from the text so that the reader may observe the events of the actual narrative uninterrupted. Melville uses a unique rhetorical method to create a bond between the reader and the narrator that guides the reader through his novel.

In parts of the novel when Ishmael refrains entirely from acknowledging his presence in the narrative, he implies that he is examining the unfolding events or conversations. In this way, he makes himself a reader of the novel, an audience member, which allows him flexibility and gives him merit as a critic. In positioning Ishmael as a reader of *Moby Dick*, Melville aligns Ishmael with the current, physical reader of the book, creating a link that allows Ishmael to conflate his voice with the mind of the reader. This serves to put the reader in Ishmael’s shoes, so that the reader may understand the metaphysical complexity of the novel and philosophically

examine it using Ishmael's methods. In this way, Melville's work instructs the reader to think about the novel and consider the world in the context he provides for it.

To break down Ishmael's roles in the novel, it is easy to categorize his character into three narrative states of being. First, there is Ishmael who is present and active in the story that is being told to the reader: "Active Ishmael." Second, there is Ishmael who is present to the reader during times that the novel moves away from the narrative of Ahab and Moby Dick, times when Ishmael muses or philosophizes about his world and guides the reader in Ishmael's school of thought: "Philosophical Ishmael." Lastly, the third state of being is when Ishmael, though still the official narrator of the story, is not present at all in the text and the reader watches events or dialogue unfold without Ishmael's personal commentary as accompaniment: "Absent Ishmael." These categories provide an easy way to view Ishmael's progression as a narrator.

Even broken down into categories, Ishmael is a complex character. Active Ishmael, for example, still appears in a variety of ways, some of which may overlap with Philosophical Ishmael. A more simple or straightforward mode of Active Ishmael is the young man present as a character within the events of the story, engaging in dialogue or physically partaking in activities with other characters. Another form of Active Ishmael, that rubs shoulders with Philosophical Ishmael, speaks more directly to the reader, discussing information about whaling that helps the reader to understand the circumstances of the narrative.

An example of this is found in chapter 32, entitled "Cetology," in which Ishmael gives the reader a lengthy overview of the scientific knowledge on different kinds of whales available at that time. This chapter is mildly significant in orienting the reader, but is in fact more significant in that it shows to the reader that Ishmael is knowledgeable on this subject, a

successful scholar. In this chapter, Active Ishmael is similar to Philosophical Ishmael in being removed from the events and addressing the reader directly. However, Active Ishmael discusses known facts or circumstances of the narrative, whereas Philosophical Ishmael discusses his own philosophical thoughts and observations. Prominent examples of Philosophical Ishmael are found in Chapter 3, "The Spouter-Inn," Chapter 35, "The Mast-Head," and Chapter 69, "The Funeral." The scene in Chapter 3 blends Active Ishmael with Philosophical Ishmael. Coming so early in the novel, this blending of the two narrative states of Ishmael is a stepping stone to help the reader build from Active Ishmael to Philosophical Ishmael.

In this chapter, "The Spouter-Inn," Ishmael describes in depth an ominous painting found at the entrance to the Spouter-Inn where he ends up staying a few nights. This is the inn in New Bedford in which Ishmael and his soon to be best friend, Queequeg, first meet as they are assigned to be bedfellows. They reside in the Spouter-Inn for a few nights waiting for the next boat to take them out to Nantucket to find a whaler they can ship aboard. Ishmael's description of the Spouter-Inn implies that it is not a very fancy place, based primarily on his rejection of finer looking establishments due to his limited funds. In the entryway, he finds a rather foreboding painting, and here he lingers, becoming removed from the progression of the narrative. He is still actively present in the story, speaking directly to the reader, but he pauses the narrative in order to discuss the painting. The purpose of this discussion is two fold. First, Active Ishmael is giving the reader a description of the atmosphere of the Spouter-Inn. Second, Philosophical Ishmael is proving himself to be a scholar, a critic, and a philosopher. He shows that he is knowledgeable in learned subjects such as art and philosophy and he discusses aspects of the painting that are interesting or confounding to him.



Ishmael's initial description of the painting is not particularly inviting, but he goes on to describe the shapes he makes out of the haze. He does this to demonstrate to the reader how to dive deeper, even with a painting that may not, at first glance, seem to merit further observation. He begins by saying, "On one side hung a very large oil-painting so thoroughly besmoked, and every way defaced, that in the unequal cross-lights by which you viewed it, it was only by diligent study and a series of systematic visits to it [...] that you could any way arrive at an understanding of its purpose," (Melville, 11). He even calls the painting a possible depiction of "chaos bewitched," (Melville, 11). Here Ishmael suggest to the reader, while addressing them directly with the pronoun "you," that one should employ diligent study and systematic visits in a situation like this, in order to obtain understanding of the object in question. This impresses upon that reader that careful analysis and deep thought are important to Ishmael in observing his surroundings. After much study and deep speculation, including discussions with others staying at the Spouter-Inn or residing in the area, Ishmael determines the scene to be that of a whaling ship in a hurricane, with a whale impaled upon a dismantled mast-head (Melville, 11). In this scene, Ishmael not only questions the actual contents of the painting, but also contemplates the significance of such a gloomy painting in the entryway to a place he intends to call home for a few nights.

This critique of the painting, though lasting only a page and found in the very beginnings of the novel, is deeply important to the understanding of Ishmael as a character and as a narrator. In an analysis of Ishmael that resonates with my findings, Manfred Putz places heavy emphasis on this scene in the entryway of the Spouter-Inn. In his work, "The Narrator as Audience: Ishmael as Reader and Critic in *Moby-Dick*," Putz proves that Ishmael is outside of the narrative

as well as being a part of it, and that the outside Ishmael acts as a reader and therefore also a critic of the novel. After quoting Ishmael's description of the painting in its entirety, Putz says, "Though the passage initially seems to present itself as the description of an object of art, it quickly shifts its main focus of orientation and emerges as a description of a viewer's *reaction* towards a specific work of art," (Putz, 162). Putz goes on to explain that this focus on the reaction of the viewer places Ishmael, as the viewer of and reactor to the painting, as representative of a universal reader or viewer.

Still within the same paragraph, Putz denotes a difference in tone brought on by a grammatical shift in the Spouter-Inn passage. Putz cleverly points out that instead of describing the painting in a first person narrative style, as Ishmael has done up to this point, he uses the pronoun "you." Putz asserts that this creates a bond between Ishmael and the reader (Putz, 163). In short, Putz says, of the whole scene, "In other words, what the passage offers is more than just a sketch of Ishmael's approach towards a work of art. It transcribes a role model for an imagined viewer reader which can be taken over or rejected by the actual audience of the novel," (Putz 163). Through this sort of bonding with the reader, Melville uses Ishmael as rhetorical tool to show the reader the space that the reader is meant to fill as critic of the novel. Putz's work illustrates ways in which Melville has Ishmael exit the novel and ways in which Ishmael addresses the reader, but Putz does not fully explore Ishmael's conflation with the reader that is possible by way of the relationship he has created with the reader before exiting the action of the novel.

What Putz's work does clarify is that, "[The reader] will have been made aware of the dangers and the inadequacies, of the complexities and the blessings, of the foolishness and the

wisdom of certain approaches to art, and hence of the role they themselves play as interpreters,” (Putz, 163). This is a very significant observation. In only the third chapter, Ishmael is serving as Melville’s tool to inform the reader that they should be reading the novel critically, to explain to the reader that they play an interactive role in the novel. Addressing the reader directly with the pronoun “you” and calling on the reader to be diligent in their observations, Ishmael calls the reader to attention. He ensures that the reader is drawn into the story and understands that their engaged reading is a part of the experience of reading *Moby Dick*.

Active Ishmael prepares the reader for Philosophical Ishmael, who in turn prepares the reader for Absent Ishmael, mainly by easing the reader into a comfortable position without a focus on Ishmael as narrator or even as significant character in the narrative beyond his story telling capacity. This all serves to prepare the reader to apply Ishmael’s form of criticism to the scenes when Ishmael is not present. This Active Ishmael who appears in Chapter 3, so early in the novel, addresses the reader and shows them how he, Ishmael, can be a critic of art. He does so to prepare the reader for their role, and then allow them to observe Philosophical Ishmael knowing that he is meant to be an example for the reader. This, then, allows the reader to apply this criticism to the parts of the novel when Ishmael is Absent. As the novel goes on, Ishmael is more and more Absent.

Ishmael has another notable Active appearance in chapter 8, “The Pulpit,” that comes close to a Philosophical Ishmael as well. By craft rather than accident, this chapter comes immediately before a chapter in which Ishmael is Absent. Active Ishmael, and a bit of Philosophical Ishmael, serve to prepare the reader for the subsequent Absent Ishmael. In this chapter, “The Pulpit,” Ishmael describes the pulpit from which the famous Nantucket Father

Mapple gives a sermon in the following chapter. The pulpit apparently reminds of a ship, having a rope ladder to mount instead of stairs. Further, Father Mapple pulls the ladder up behind him, making the pulpit inaccessible once he has ascended into it.

Active Ishmael contemplates openly as to why this might be, and Philosophical Ishmael comes into play wondering if there is a philosophical reason that Father Mapple performs this action despite being in a church and having no obvious need to raise the rope ladder. This dynamic is easily viewed when Ishmael is discussing this action of taking up the rope: “[...] thought I, there must be some sober reason for this thing; furthermore, it must symbolise something unseen. Can it be, then, that by that act of physical isolation, he signifies his spiritual withdrawal for the time, from all outward worldly ties and connexions?” (Melville, 34). Ishmael’s musings here show the reader, by example, ways to think about the scenes encountered in the novel. Ishmael suggests that things may not be so simple as they first seem, and that there must be reason for them. He implies that this reason is likely to be symbolic in nature. Ishmael continually makes these sorts of appearances throughout the novel and suggests to the reader ways in which to interpret the story of Ahab and the white whale.

Chapter 9, entitled “The Sermon,” is the first chapter in the novel in which Ishmael does not make any mention of himself to the reader. The chapter is told entirely in Father Mapple’s words, and Ishmael does not make a personal appearance. The section is written by quoting Father Mapple’s speech, and the quotation takes up very nearly the entire chapter. This is an easy way for a reader to be comfortable without their narrator, so it is a way for Ishmael to ease the reader into being comfortable with future scenes of the narrative, in which actions and dialogue unfold without Ishmael. Due to the quotations, Ishmael’s presence is not as strikingly lacking in

this chapter as it is in chapters when he continues to narrate but does not refer to himself.

Ishmael's commentary from the previous chapter on the pulpit and the rope ladder reminds the reader about engaged critical reading as the reader prepares to dive into the chapter with the sermon--the sermon being just such a moment in which to apply that critical reading. The sermon itself deals with the story of Jonah and the Whale in such a way that brings a sense of foreboding down on the reader. This use of Active and then immediately following Absent Ishmael prepares the reader for future chapters in which Philosophical Ishmael appears as the guide to prelude a chapter in which Ishmael is Absent and the reader is left to apply that philosophy to their reading.

In Chapter 35, "The Mast-Head," Ishmael appears as a philosopher, describing the trains of thought he would often follow while performing a rather absent minded job of looking for whales. This chapter is immediately followed by the first chapter in which Moby Dick is discussed, and Ishmael is Absent in that chapter. In chapters like "The Mast-Head," Philosophical Ishmael is very present, this is his most intimate direct interaction with the reader, in that he clearly speaks directly to the reader and is, in a sense, alone with the reader while discussing his thoughts. In this intimacy, he exposes his thoughts to the reader, both to show the reader who Ishmael is, and to direct the reader in philosophical thought. Ishmael shows the reader that he is a scholar and a thinker in the Spouter-Inn scene. In doing this, he also gives the reader direction by example in how to be a scholar and how to examine art, or scenes of a novel, critically. The same is true of a chapter like "The Mast-Head," in which Ishmael both describes himself as the wayward philosopher unlikely to see any whales due to being so lost in thought, and shares with the reader his feelings of the importance of philosophy in life. He addresses the

reader, saying, "Let me make a clean breast of it here and frankly admit that I kept but sorry guard. With the problem of the universe revolving in me, how could I -- being left completely to myself at such a thought-engendering altitude..." (Melville, 131). He implies that it is near impossible for him to not philosophize when he is allowed to be alone with himself.

Comparatively, the reader, when musing over the novel, should also find it necessary to philosophize about the events in the narrative and consider them critically. As comedian and philosopher, Ishmael adds, addressing ship owners of Nantucket, "Beware of enlisting in your vigilant fisheries any lad [...] given to unseasonable meditateness; [...] your whales must be seen before they can be killed; and this sunken eyed young Platonist will tow you ten wakes round the world, and never make you one pint of sperm the richer," (Melville, 131). Ishmael is joking about his own absent mindedness, but simultaneously stresses the importance of philosophy, and discusses his own philosophies with the reader. Discussing his philosophies creates an intimacy with the reader, drawing them nearer to Ishmael. All the while, he is suggesting to the reader how to proceed when he exits the narrative.

Ishmael starts out in the novel as Active Ishmael in order to introduce himself and to establish a relationship with the reader. As the narrative progresses, however, the chapters in which Ishmael appears as active become fewer, and Ishmael is Absent for much of the second half of the novel. Once Ishmael has provided the groundwork he needs to provide for the reader, he removes himself from the narrative. As the narrative nears its end, Ishmael makes very few Active appearances, and when he does appear present to the reader, it is as Philosophical Ishmael in brief interludes between Absent Ishmael. In Chapter 74, "The Sperm Whale's Head - Contrasted View," Philosophical Ishmael is not only observing the physical aspects of a sperm

whale head, but also considering what these aspects may mean for the life of a sperm whale. He opens the chapter by addressing the reader directly and referring to the sperm whale head and the right whale head, which are each hanging off the *Pequod* at opposite ends. Ishmael says to the reader, "Here, now, are two great whales, laying their heads together; let us join them, and lay together our own" (Melville 273). He speaks directly to the reader of merging minds, moving into a philosophical chapter that he and the reader can consider side by side.

Following this comment, Ishmael dives into his philosophy about whales, directly inviting the reader to join him with their own thoughts. He discusses at length the size and position of a sperm whale's eyes, considering how their observation of the world is affected by their proportionally small eyes. Ishmael chooses to discuss a whale's view of the world, much as his philosophy has been about his view of the world based on what he is able to see. This discussion reminds the reader of different perspectives; the position of the whale's eyes affect his gaze, which potentially affects his perspective on the world. This could be applied to the characters of the story as well, this chapter serving to remind the reader that the characters, like Queequeg, Ahab, and Ishmael, all have a different view based on their backgrounds, and therefore have different perspectives on the world.

Ishmael frequently discusses the body of the whale, or whales in general, when he is present as philosopher. In "Wound, Beast, Revisions: Versions of the Melville Meme," John Bryant writes about the philosophical connections between characters of *Moby Dick* and "the beast," that is, *Moby Dick* himself. When discussing Ishmael's personal journey, Bryant focuses on Ishmael's contemplation about whale's lives, which Ishmael often does through observation of their corpses. Speaking of Ishmael's perspective, Bryant says, "If this monstrous mass of flesh

is a conscious being, other than ourselves, then what is the mix of material and immaterial selves that constitutes consciousness and being?" (Bryant, 204). Bryant discusses the characters' philosophical and psychological connections to nature, and in particular to whales, as the focus of the novel. He shows how *Moby Dick* is adaptable to pop culture by using timeless descriptions of characters as they interact with nature. Melville's use of Ishmael as narrator creates a connection with the reader, allowing them to view these characters through Ishmael's lens, but also with their own perspective inevitably tied in. Aligning Ishmael as a fellow reader of the novel leaves the reader to view the characters without Ishmael's commentary, which lends itself to applying modern interpretations to this timeless narrative.

Ishmael's Absence for entire chapters of the novel provides a depth to the narrative that would not otherwise exist. The connection that Ishmael creates with the reader is what allows the reader to experience the novel in a unique way, and what enables new generations of readers to apply new interpretations to the philosophy of the novel. This is achieved by aligning the reader's own perspective closely with Ishmael's, and for this reason Ishmael is necessary to the narrative. Ishmael must first be present to create a bond with the reader, so he begins by establishing himself as a character in the narrative and a guide to the reader. He then offers the reader his perspective through philosophy in scenes such as the Spouter-Inn scene and the Mast-Head scene, and shows the reader how to develop their own perspectives from the novel. It is then that Ishmael removes himself from the narrative and becomes observer and critic to the narrative, aligned with the reader who is now left to be observer and critic themselves.

As the narrative progresses, Ishmael is mostly Absent. The reader has become well acquainted with the characters, and Active Ishmael has guided the reader through previous



chapters with scenes of whaling and typical life aboard the *Pequod*. Active Ishmael has also recounted to the reader various tales of Moby Dick sightings, or stories of the whale attacking other ships. Towards the end of the novel, Melville begins to reach the philosophical peak of the novel. The actual narrative, which Melville created to support his philosophical work, also comes to its peak very late in the novel, with the *Pequod* finally encountering Moby Dick himself in the last three chapters. Melville crafted Ishmael to first bond with the reader and provide information, then to provide philosophy and an example of thinking, then to leave the reader to experience the final events of the novel alongside Ishmael.

All of this culminates to the final three chapters of the novel. These are Chapter 133, "The Chase -- First Day," Chapter 134, "The Chase -- Second Day," and Chapter 135, "The Chase -- Third Day." Ishmael is Absent in these three chapters, leaving the reader to view the final events in the lives of the crew of the *Pequod* uninterrupted. Ishmael is not directly involved in the main action, making him more an observer than a character, aligning him with the reader and providing a space, where Ishmael's character fits, for the reader to fit into as well, as an observer of the events. Ishmael and the reader, then, observe Ahab in "The Chase --First Day" as he "[...] suddenly thrust out his face, fiercely snuffing up the sea air as a sagacious ship's dog will, in drawing night to some barbarous isle. He declared that a whale must be near" (Melville, 445). Ishmael does not provide personal commentary, and the reader observes Ahab at his perch, desperately hunting down this whale that other whalers flee from, this whale that he barely survived a previous encounter with.

In Chapter 36, "The Quarter-Deck," Ishmael is also Absent, immediately following "The Mast-Head" in which he was Philosophical. In Chapter 36, Ahab comes on deck and reveals to

the crew his desire to hunt the legendary Moby Dick, and Starbuck confronts Ahab, suggesting that it may not be wise or ethical to hunt the beast. Ahab responds with a long-winded rant, in which he says, "I would strike the sun if it insulted me. For could the sun do that, then I could do the other; since there is ever a sort of fair play herein, jealousy presiding over all creations," (Melville, 136). In this scene, as well as in the final chapters, Ishmael's absence allows the reader to consider Ahab's attitude and think of it in the context of the novel as a whole. Ahab's dramatic end then sends a clear message to the reader that challenging great forces such as nature without any humility or self-awareness will end in disaster. Here, at the very end, the novel comes to its true lesson, demonstrating to the reader that man is not larger than nature and that an individual should not, without humility, challenge those forces that are larger and different than him.

Following the destruction of the *Pequod* and the deaths of all those on board, Ishmael tells of his own survival in an epilogue so as to not interrupt his absence in the last three chapters, an absence that allows the reader to observe the most significant part of the novel unaccompanied. In "Who Is Ishmael?" Thomas L. Dumm writes, "Who is Ishmael? For me, this is the most important question to ask if we are to think about the lonely self, this strange self that is beyond itself" (Dumm, 399). Dumm describes Ishmael as extremely lonely, and discusses loneliness as a theme in the novel. Dumm discusses Ishmael's removal from the narrative as a marker of Ishmael's solitude, or alienation. Ishmael's survival is, in its reality, lonely, and his entire telling of the narrative is a reflection on events of the past. Ishmael is removed from the rest of the crew, perhaps resulting in an otherness, but also resulting in his ability to observe the other characters and contemplate the outcomes of their actions. Being new to whaling and less

integral to the workings of the *Pequod*, Ishmael naturally falls into the role of observing to learn. On this dark voyage, he learns much more than the ins and outs of whaling. Ahab's pride drags him and his crew down as Ishmael watches.

Carl F. Strauch writes in "Ishmael: Time and Personality in *Moby-Dick*," "But if we are to have a proper view of Ishmael's ordering of experience we must read *Moby-Dick* backward from that vortex," (Strauch, 468). The vortex Strauch mentions is in reference to the vortex created by the sinking *Pequod*, from which Queequeg's empty coffin emerges and floats Ishmael to safety. Reading backward from the vortex is intended to remark on Ishmael's knowing the end of the story as he tells it to the reader. Upon reaching the end, the reader can reflect on the events of the novel and draw conclusions based on this knowledge. However, Strauch describes the novel as a manifestation of Ishmael's trauma from the journey of the *Pequod*, focusing on Ishmael alone rather than a connection with the reader. Ishmael does clearly address the reader throughout the novel, and his alignment with the reader places emphasis on the reader as a main character as well. The epilogue is further evidence of Ishmael's relationship with the reader. It serves to inform the reader of Ishmael's survival; this is Ishmael returning as Active Ishmael to show the reader how he survived and was therefore able to bring the tale to his audience.

Melville uses Ishmael as narrator and character, as philosopher, and as reader to connect with the reader, to provide a narrative framework for a philosophical novel, and to guide the reader in navigating that narrative critically. Ishmael begins the novel by telling the reader of his restlessness and his need to break out of the place he finds himself in. So instead of knocking people's hats off, or falling on his sword as Cato does, Ishmael does something far more successful: he humbles himself. He goes out on a whaling voyage, relinquishing much of his free

will to work very hard as a sailor in the merciless business of whaling. In doing this, he observes the universe, and he observes Captain Ahab, who challenges the universe without remorse. Upon surviving the wreckage of the *Pequod*, Ishmael reflects, and, some years later, nevermind how many precisely, he sets about sharing his observations with his reader.

Melville used a unique form of narration as a rhetorical tool to provide not so much a novel, as a philosophical guide for Melville's own view and understanding of the universe. By using a character as a narrator, Melville created a space for this individual, and when Ishmael steps out of the story, he leaves an empty space that would not be present if the novel were simply told from the perspective of an unnamed third party. By removing himself from the narrative, Ishmael becomes observer or reader himself, and he and the reader together fill this space aboard the *Pequod*, watching the events unfold on this terrifying journey. The reader can choose whether or not to accept this position aboard the doomed vessel, and the reader can choose whether or not to agree with Melville's philosophies as they are expressed in the novel. Melville has presented his philosophies, as they are, for himself and for his readers to consider.

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