
Chapter 1

The Loomings

Identity and Characterization

1. What is the significance of the name, Ishmael?

Answer: Ishmael is the biblical name of the Patriarch Abraham's natural son that he had by his Egyptian servant, Hagar, when his wife Sarah could not conceive. Later, after Sarah is given a son, Hagar and Ishmael are cast out into the desert.

What connection might there be between Melville's Ishmael and the biblical one?

Answer: Melville's character says, not that his name is Ishmael, but that he "should be called Ishmael." He sees himself as a wanderer, a loner and one who keeps apart from other men. He is an outcast.

2. The subject of man's supposed possession of free will is introduced. How is this concept presented?

Answer: Men prefer to think they control their own destiny, but to say that man has *free will* is to lose sight of all the qualifying factors that enter into the equation. This is a proposition that comes to the fore often in Melville. Captain Ahab has no doubt that he is master of his fate. He has one tormenting urge, it is to kill the white whale that he felt had ruined him. In striving to carry out his surpassing desire, he always must depend on others. The reader will encounter many speculations about life and the question of whether man's will is free for his own determination, merely subject to the "fates" or, under the sovereign hand of His Maker. Ishmael refers to "those state managers, the Fates" as his begrudging name for God or the One who controls life.

3. What are the reasons that Ishmael gives for always going to sea as a sailor? What is his reason for making this point?

Answer: He is a simple man, not an aristocrat or a blue blood. He

loves the work and he needs to be paid for doing it. He goes to sea for the lively exercise and the pure air, not to travel as a docile passenger. He desires the intangible satisfaction it affords and the fact that the sea brings him back from “being hazy about the eyes.” The sea is his “therapy”.

All of this has to do with the mystery and intrigue that the author wants to build about the vast and dangerous sea and excitement of sailing.

4. As Ishmael expresses his strange attitudes about why and how he came to sign up for the position on the whaler, what possible parallel can we imagine in our own lives? Why is this particular novel appropriate for young students to read and think about?

Answer: In the fairly near future we may wonder how we, ourselves, came to sign up for a particular position. What controlling force is operating in our lives? How are we influenced and directed to choose a course?

Technique

1. Do you see anything in the author’s early paragraphs about how all men find their way to the sea, or to any water? Can there be some submerged reference in this commentary about the sea as a magnet that draws people with a powerful and mysterious attraction ?

Answer: This, perhaps, is a reference to *evolution*, the pagan theory that life originated in the primal slop that still retains its dark allure for us. The Bible makes reference to the sea as symbolic of life in that, even with a calm surface, much is hidden from view. The wicked, says the prophet Isaiah, are like the “troubled sea [Isa.57:20], when it cannot rest . . .”, thus, the biblical analogy is very different. Melville cashes in on the many contradictions that are found in the sea, the beauty that covers the latent power, the sometimes placid surface that hides great, crushing depth, the simplicity that disguises teeming multitudes of diverse creatures, large and small.

2. Although Ishmael says he is drawn irresistibly to go to sea, he is unable to tell why he does it on a whaling ship. What reason does he give for his decision?

Answer: Providence decided it a long time ago.

3. What does Melville give to us in the *Pequod*? Interpret the *symbolic* character of the crew and the ship itself.

Answer: Melville establishes the *Pequod*, with its crew of many races and types, as the world of men. It is a kind of united nations of the sea that will be the stage on which the actors will perform.

4. Identify the *irony* in the paragraph where the narrator, Ishmael, makes the observation that “I always go to sea as a sailor . . . Ah! How cheerfully we consign ourselves to perdition!” What is being said here? Think of a biblical allusion that the author is bringing to bear in his statement.

Answer: The irony arises from the protest of many people that money is the root of all evil, yet these same people work for all the money they can get. The Bible says that “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” [Matt.19:24] There is irony-of-situation when there is a discrepancy between appearance and reality, irony-of-statement when there is a discrepancy between what words seem to say and what they mean. Here, Ishmael, is remarking about how he is drawn irresistibly to sail.
