

# [Ishmael in moby dick](https://assignbuster.com/ishmael-in-moby-dick/)

Moby Dick ends with the unexpected death of everyone on the ship but Ishmael. Throughout the novel, the ship and its mates serve as a microcosm of the society for Melville to critique. Each character represents certain qualities and ideals that Melville, in turn, judges. Ishmael’s survival is an intrinsic statement of approval of his character. With everyone else dead, it is not clear what about Ishmael’s character makes him superior to the rest of the crew. If survival is Melville’s stamp of approval, it seems flawed that Ishmael should live; but under careful observation, it is clear that Ishmael is the only one worth the achievement. Ishmael’s greatest trait is his incredible balance; he exemplifies many qualities we admire in other individuals without being consumed by them. Additionally, he has the ability to maintain this balance while others cannot. Ahab, for example, has a firm understanding of fate, a quality of which Melville obviously approves. However, Ahab can think of nothing other than his fate, and is enveloped by it in every aspect of his life. Likewise, Starbuck is noble and has clearly-defined morals to which he clings. Yet those morals stand in the way of him doing what is best for his shipmates. When he has the opportunity to kill Ahab and consequently save all members of the crew, he cannot do so because he finds it to be too reprehensible. Consequentially, and because Starbuck cannot intervene, Ahab is doomed to succumb to his inevitable fate. What is ultimately clear as Melville’s preferred way of being is a balance of these distinctive traits. In “ The Albatross,” Melville conveys a belief which helps us understand that: But in pursuit of those far mysteries we dream of, or in tormented chase of that demon phantom that, some time or other, swims before all human hearts; while chasing such over this round globe, they either lead us on in barren mazes or midway leave us whelmed (259). Melville believes that when we come to understand parts of ourselves through philosophy or experience we do not find anything new. Anything that we discover was there all along. The human tendency, he suggests, is to go out in search of ourselves. These sorts of plights are most often futile, and always unnecessary. His most important belief is that the means by which we discover our inner selves do not change the outcome; what we find is the same. Implicitly, any given philosophical ideal is only valuable insofar as it helps us achieve our greater, ultimate goal – that of self-discovery. Furthermore, philosophy and ideals are useless when they come into conflict with introspection, and balance. Their only purpose is to help us to know ourselves more fully. In this respect, Ishmael is superior; he does not become entangled with any one particular ideal, but instead uses each of them merely to sustain his more important, introspective goal. He evolves to become a more balanced, self-aware individual by the end of his journey. Ishmael is the only individual who undergoes a great change from the beginning to the end of the novel, while his shipmates remain static and therefore are doomed. Ishmael begins his journey in a dismal state, with no apparent purpose; he wanders the island of Manhattan alone, and seems to be very depressed. However pitiable his state may be, Ishmael is certainly aware of his need for direction. In the first paragraph of the novel, he asserts that whenever he is in such a deplorable condition, “ then [he] account[s] it high time to get to sea as soon as [he] can.” (3). This is the first of many instances in which Ishmael demonstrates his knowledge of his own limitations. Though it will take him a considerable amount of time, Ishmael knows that he must remedy his wandering state. He believes that being alone in the vast ocean will give him time to reflect and find a purpose. It will allow him to establish himself, and to find a place in the society. Ishmael knows that the sea, as his vehicle for self-discovery, holds the cure for his maladies. Ishmael does find himself wandering in the opening weeks of his voyage. He is in awe of the vast ship, and spends time observing his shipmates. His particular interest evidently lies in Ahab. Ishmael’s early impression of Ahab shows us that he is drawn to Ahab’s oddness, and seeks to quantize and qualify what makes him different. “ So powerfully did the whole grim aspect of Ahab affect me, and the livid brain which streaked it, that for the first few moments I hardly noted that not a little of this overbearing grimness was owing to the barbaric white leg upon which he partially stood.” (135). Because Ishmael is unsure of where he, himself, stands, he cannot really understand himself. Instead, he yearns to evaluate others. This is remedied once Ishmael is more comfortable in his environment, but he never quite escapes his fascination with Ahab. But after being on board the ship for a considerable length of time, Ishmael finds his niche among the crew. He begins to assert his role amongst the others, and proclaims that he is one of them; “ I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shots had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded in theirs…I and all the others had taken our oaths of violence and revenge.” (194). At this point, the present Ishmael helps us reflect on his past self, and observe the change that he has endured. No longer is he the uncertain outsider to whom we are introduced on the first page. He starts the novel saying, “ Call me Ishmael,” illustrating his hesitant state of mind. But here, it seems that he is Ishmael, owns his name, and is a member of the society, comfortable in his own skin. His narration is empowered and lively. He gleans a sense of understanding and purpose from the other crew members, and unites with them against their common enemy – Moby Dick. Ishmael is not an integral member of the group, but the security that he derives from finding his place enables him to temporarily abandon some of his most difficult questions. He now feels as if he has a purpose, and his introspective pursuit falls subordinate to his position as a shipmate. He has not – and never will – forget about the reasons he decided to come aboard the Pequod. But owing to his newfound sense of place, Ishmael no longer desperately seeks the answers to his life questions. Rather, with his time in high demand, he is comfortable to be shaped by his experiences aboard the ship. Through the evolution of his friendship with Queequeg, Ishmael learns to understand and manage his fear of the unknown. When he meets Queequeg for the first time, Ishmael admits that he is profoundly frightened. He knows nothing about Queequeg but that of his reputation as a peddler of heads. Faced with his sudden presence in the middle of the night, Ishmael admits to being profoundly frightened. At the same time, he recognizes that “ Ignorance is the parent of fear” ( 24), owning his weakness. This statement, an obvious reflection of the present Ishmael upon his past experiences, elucidates the change that he undergoes. He explains that because he knows nothing about Queequeg, he harbors and unwarranted fear. But as the two get to know each other, it is clear that there is nothing to be afraid of. On the ship, they spend a great deal of time together. Ishmael learns from Queequeg on many occasions, such as when they sit metaphorically threading the strings of fate in, “ The Mat-Maker.” Indeed, Queequeg is more of a model than any other character in the novel. After this experience, Ishmael learns to model Queequeg in feeling appropriate amounts of trepidation towards things that deserve to be feared. The way in which Ishmael describes his reverence of the White Whale comes from what Queequeg teaches him about Nature. As he starts to understand the greatness of Nature, and all of her creatures, Ishmael takes it upon himself to discover what it is that is so terrible about the whale. This discovery is monumental for Ishmael because he delves deeply into the thoughts of the human race – a thing he would never have attempted before his journey. He indicates that “ there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than that redness which affronts blood.” (205). Obviously, there is something to be feared in the whale. But instead of blindly labeling it terrifying, Ishmael successfully explains why he should fear, respect, and revere the whale. Ishmael also learns to understand and respect that which Queequeg reveres in Nature. Ishmael’s original perspective is limited only to how Nature can help him become more introspective. His only aspiration for his journey is to take advantage of the solidarity that Nature offers. Being along on the waters, with nothing more to distract him, will facilitate greater self-understanding. In the chapter, “ The Mast-Head”, when Ishmael stands one hundred and fifty feet above the ground, looking out over the sea, he demonstrates his new perspective through a discussion of his position: There you stand, a hundred feet above the silent decks, striding along the deep, as if the masts were gigantic stilts, while beneath you and between your legs, as it were, swim the hugest monsters of the sea…lost in the infinite series of the sea, with nothing ruffled but the waves. The tranced ship indolently rolls; the drowsy trade winds blow; everything resolves you into languor. For the most part, in this tropic whaling life, a sublime uneventfulness invests you; you hear no news; read no gazettes; extras with startling accounts of commonplaces never delude you… (169). When Ishmael depicts his feelings about his situation so high up on the masts, he displays a new sense of awe towards Nature. He describes a greatness of the sea, and its power to hypnotize him. There is a sense that the plights of Ishmael’s existence are trivialized by Nature’s power. But Ishmael does not seek to explain or control that which he observes. He is no great philosopher, and that is part of what makes him so vital a crewmember. He does not overanalyze Nature or seek to understand it, but is content to have gleaned this new perspective. This perspective is important in the development of Ishmael’s narrative. He never forgets the respect that he acquires for Nature with Queequeg as his guide. Even in the last part of his journey, when he describes the Pequod’s fall from greatness, he displays this understanding: “…then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago” (624). As the Pequod and its crew are swallowed in a wave, Ishmael notes that the sea is not disturbed. As important as the fall of the Pequod is to some, it is inconsequential in light of the enormity of Nature. This is an observation that Ishmael could not have made before his journey, because he would have been caught up in the monstrosity of the disaster. But with Queequeg’s understanding and a sense of perspective, Ishmael is able to properly and adequately place the Pequod’s fall from greatness into the larger scheme of events. Ishmael’s understanding of fate and free will, and the roles that each plays, evolves in light of such introspection. In the first chapter, Ishmael’s declaration “ Who ain’t a slave?” shows that he feels bent to the wills of a number of different forces. He does not proclaim any discontent with his apparent inability to affect his fate; rather, Ishmael tries to convince the reader that he has no free will, and is, in effect, powerless. He says, “ However they may thump and punch me about, I have the satisfaction of knowing that it is all right; that everybody else is one way or other served in much the same way…” (6). Ishmael justifies his enslaved mentality by implying that he resigns up to be ruled by his fate. However, this is more a reflection of Ishmael’s initial, deplorable state than his actual nature. Later, once he is more comfortably situated on the ship, he reveals a new perspective. He comes to understand that he is not powerless, and that his choices can, indeed, effect change. Once aboard the Pequod, Ishmael’s view of fate changes significantly, as he recognizes the power of his free will. In the chapter “ The Mat-Maker,” he and Queequeg sit weaving the metaphorical threads of fate. Here, Ishmael displays a changed perspective of fate and free will, as he describes the ways in which they are intertwined: The straight warp of necessity, not to be swerved from its ultimate course – its every alternating vibration, indeed, only tending to that; free will still free to ply her shuttle between given threads; and chance, though restrained in its play within the right lines of necessity, and sideways in its motions directed by free will, though thus prescribed to by both, chance by turns rules either, and has the last featuring blow at events (234). Now Ishmael recognizes that free will does have a place in his fate. Though its role is limited, and confined by the works of chance and necessity, free will does have some power to affect fate. These proclamations exude a greater personal power than Ishmael originally leads us to believe that he has. But just after declaring these sentiments, the “ ball of free will drops” from his hands, at the spotting of the whale. Ultimately, thought Ishmael is not a slave to the whale in the way that Ahab is, his life is always to some degree controlled by it. In light of such statements about the power of his choices, Ishmael seems to be remarkably passive. He does not, as one might expect, take on an active pursuit of affecting his fate. It would be sensible for Ishmael to become more active and involved in the goings-on of ship life, but instead, he continues to be the Ishmael that we have always known. In, “ The First Lowering”, Ishmael recounts the horror-filled scene of the crew’s lowering for a whale. “ A short rushing sound leaped out of the boat; it was the darted iron of Queequeg… lashing them across the gunwale, we tumbled back to our places. There we sat, up to our knees in the sea, the water covering every rib and plank…” (244-245). Here again, Ishmael plays the role of the observer. His presence on the boat is non-essential to the task at hand, as we see when Queequeg is the one taking risks to capture the whale. But here, Ishmael’s role as observer is not only essential, but indicative of his balance. Even when it seems Ishmael is fully aware of his power to affect his fate, he remains unchanged. This seems to make Ishmael a hypocrite; he makes a broad, philosophical statement only to ignore its implications. But this is really an indication of his balance. Ishmael becomes aware of, but not consumed by, his fate. He utilizes his realization in a reasonable way. It helps him understand his life, and categorize his decisions. It may have been fate that he should end up on a whaling ship, but in order to get there, Ishmael had to choose the Pequod. And it was only chance that the Pequod was one of the three ships amongst which Ishmael was forced to choose. The transition from feeling enslaved by his fate, to being aware of and taking part in it is an important one for Ishmael. From a wandering, funeral-following hermit to a member of an important crew, he makes an important transition. His narrative is empowered with a sense of himself. Even when describing his role, albeit limited, in the first lowering of the Pequod, it is clear that Ishmael belongs. This transition is indicative of both the progress that he has made on his journey so far, and the equilibrium that this progress has helped him to achieve. Though we are ultimately taken by surprise that Ishmael is the lone survivor of the Pequod’s fall from greatness, there are evidently great reasons for him to live on. Besides all of the personal qualities he exhibits that exemplify Melville’s ideal, Ishmael also has an important perspective. In light of his balance, and general understanding, he is the perfect narrator. He embodies the life of the ship, with his different relationships and general familiarity with other members of the crew. His position is as objective as could be expected because he does not possess any great skill that inextricably links him to the ship. Though Ishmael would never say so, he is not a vital part of the crew. His importance, therefore, lies outside the bounds of the ship. Without him, the Pequod’s story is lost forever, and no one can learn from her failure. Though there are other individuals on the ship, none could present the journey in a more realistic way than Ishmael. Each has his own bias, or fanatic philosophy. But Ishmael, in his perfect equilibrium, presents the story to an audience for them to make of it what they may. Melville develops a unique approach for inserting his ideas into his novel, without directly stating them. They are not at all obvious to the reader, but upon careful examination, we see that his stamp of approval is his choice to give life to Ishmael. This leaves the reader with a certain amount of work to do to discover what about Ishmael makes him worthy of such approval. On the few occasions when Melville shines through clearly, his style is comparative to that of Mark Twain. Rather than bury his sentiments like Melville, Twain disguises them in his characters – his voice can certainly be heard in the novel. He uses monologues given by individuals we admire in order to assert his ideas into the novel. It is also worth noting that the form of his narrative – the protagonist is a young boy – does not lend itself well to philosophical commentary. That said, Twain does use the ending of Huckleberry Finn in much the same way as Melville. The fates of his characters make both political and social statements on the complexity – or lack thereof – of human nature. Moby Dick’s length and form make it opportune for Melville to develop and assert his opinions as he does, in addition to using the fates of his characters. With his sophisticated approach, he creates a challenge for his readers. They must search, and scrape below the surface, to find out what he believes to be ideal.