

Call him Ishmael: the  
reliability and  
authority of Melville's  
omniscient narrator...



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Moby Dick is widely considered one of the greatest literary creations in history. The denseness of meaning, infinite possibility of interpretation, and ambiguity of implications give the text many layers. Therefore, knowing that the trustworthiness of a work of fiction is always somewhat unreliable, the audience must seek to determine whether Ishmael, Melville's all-knowing, omnipresent narrator, is supposed to be a trusted and reliable witness to all events that take place while aboard the Pequod, or a first-person, omniscient narrator who spontaneously inherits mysterious knowledge about all things surrounding the voyage, even when he is not present. Placing Ishmael within the context of the story is where the first problem arises. Is Ishmael a regular, hard-working sailor looking to breathe the fresh sea air? Or is Ishmael the first-person embodiment of a third-person, omniscient narrator? The latter would be a rarity when considering the normal modes of narration in English literature. However, the possibility is there, and therefore one must look to the text for evidence as to whether Ishmael knows information that would befall the normal first-person participant. After establishing our hypothesis, we can then look to the reliability and trustworthiness of Ishmael, what effect this literary device has on the tone of the text, and what the immediate and long-term effects of that narrative style are. The tone of Moby Dick shifts frequently throughout the text. In the beginning, Ishmael claims to be a novice sailor who uses the sea as a means of getting away from the hustle and bustle of city life: Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos ("slang for neurosis," as the gloss tells us) get such an upper hand of

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me [...] I account it is high time to get to sea as soon as I can (18). Clearly, Melville intends for his narrator to be a regular guy aching for some sort of adventure or release. However, this forces us into wondering about the existence of other narrative techniques within the text, i. e., Ishmael's continual display of scientific knowledge. For instance, if one wanted to analyze the paradoxical nature of Ishmael's narrative transformations in relation to the tone of the novel, the " Etymology" and the " Cetology" would be good places to start. The etymology that precedes the text consists of a lengthy list of references to whales or the word " whale" through the history of literature, ranging from the Bible to Shakespeare. It seems that Melville is attempting to substantiate the symbolism and importance behind the ideology of the white whale by proving its existence as a symbol over time. Hennig Cohen, of the University of Pennsylvania, gives an interesting perspective on the reasoning behind Melville's conflicting stylistic tones:[A]n Etymology of the word whale, which, for all of its scholarly appearance, turns out to be incomplete, contains conflicting information, and is mildly erroneous. This is followed by an array of Extracts or citations about whales and whaling from the accumulation of the ages, though these quotations are preceded by the warning that they should not be mistaken for veritable gospel cetology. What is being said here is that leviathan is real, so much greasy blubber for the rendering, and at the same time sublime, and for this reason he cannot be hooked. No definitions can define him, no system of knowledge can categorize him. The structure of his story is a hunt for this rogue whale, a symbol of the pursuit of absolute knowledge that will escape the finding, and indeed, this is the knowledge that will be found." From this helpful excerpt we can now begin to trace the disparities in tone that make <https://assignbuster.com/call-him-ishmael-the-reliability-and-authority-of-melvilles-omniscient-narrator/>

the ideologies behind *Moby Dick* seem so paradoxical. Melville appears to want badly to display concrete proof of the whale as a symbol through Ishmael's discourse, yet simultaneously to create an ungraspable entity that would mystify all readers brave enough to attempt to break down its meaning. Later on, in Chapter 32, entitled "Cetology," the reader is again exposed to a shift in narration when Ishmael veers off course into a scientific discussion. This chapter describes the different classes of whales that inhabit the ocean and their characteristics. The existence of this chapter is consistent with the establishment from the etymology that the whale is a very real creature that exists within the boundaries and rules of our world; yet it is an ungraspable, undefinable creature that is *Moby Dick*. The "Cetology" offered to us by Ishmael is similar to the etymology in that the tone of its existence and its purpose within the novel is paradoxical. The purely scientific chapter appears solely for Ishmael to clarify the physicality of the sperm whale. Interestingly, the effect is ambiguous, making the reader even more unable to comprehend exactly what *Moby Dick* is or symbolizes, as well as what Melville's stylistic intentions were: It was stated at the outset, that this system would not be here, and at one, perfected. You cannot but plainly see that I have kept my word. But I now leave my cetological System thus unfinished [...] This whole book is but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught" (125). At the conclusion of the scientific discourse on the leviathan, Ishmael admits to the imperfection in the system he has created. However, even before this final statement of admitted failure to classify the whale, Ishmael gives numerous opinions of "the best and latest authorities" on cetology. Examples of the quotations from these sources include "confusion," "unfathomable," "incomplete" and "<https://assignbuster.com/call-him-ishmael-the-reliability-and-authority-of-melvilles-omniscient-narrator/>

Impenetrable." This is how Melville intends to twist the mind of the reader around the idea of the mystery of Moby Dick while also trivializing a chapter like "Cetology." Although the chapter appears to be a humorous way for Melville to add authority to his narrator and create confusion regarding the truth beyond Ishmael's expertise, one can argue that the information given in the system is somewhat reliable. David Sisk explains, Despite Herman Melville's jests at the expense of such serious cetologists as Scoresby, Beale and Cuvier, the material he presents so humorously is no joke. Today's reader can still draw from this chapter a substantial amount of accurate information concerning identifying marks and behavior patterns of earth's major species of cetaceans ... Melville's prose, however playfully unscientific, remains sufficiently accurate that none of his fourteen descriptions pose a problem in identification. Sisk's comments bring together the idea that appears to sum up Melville's dual style in composing Moby Dick: total knowledge is something that will always elude man. Assuming that Melville knew what he was doing when he created the character of Ishmael, the tone of the novel appears to be designed to bring about opposing feelings in its readers. Many points in the text are paradoxical in this sense. Some of Ishmael's narration attempts to be scientific and mechanical, such as his description of "ambergris", the valuable substance found in the bowels of the sperm whale. Simultaneously, the narration will shift from these robotic discourses to deep, rich, figurative language that seems entirely to derail Melville's previous attempts at substantiating his and Ishmael's knowledge and expertise. In Chapter 96, Ishmael, after narrating on one of these literal topics (tri-works), quickly dazes into a metaphoric and highly combative discourse in comparison to his previous attempts at substantiation. Chapter <https://assignbuster.com/call-him-ishmael-the-reliability-and-authority-of-melvilles-omniscient-narrator/>

103, "Measurement of the Whale's Skeleton," is yet another paradoxical attempt by Ishmael to make the whale a graspable entity. This time, Ishmael's attempts to quantify the size of the whale, stating that it would probably have weighed tons and that it probably "would considerably outweigh the combined population of a whole village of one thousand one hundred inhabitants" (347). Strangely, this quantification of the size of the whale is not likely to be correct, even by Ishmael's "careful calculation." Furthermore, Ishmael then goes on to state that these bones only give a partial picture of the whale, of which it is impossible to find an accurate representation. This paradoxical, almost comical attempt at substantiating Ishmael as a trustworthy narrator establishes a depth and ambiguous tone. As an audience we must now ask ourselves the question that arises from our analysis of Ishmael's flip-flopping narrative style: what are the implications behind Melville's purposeful contradiction involving his narrator and tone of text? Perhaps Melville wanted to compose an altogether paradoxical text: throughout the entirety of the novel, there is evidence that Melville put large amounts of time and work into finding ways for his narrator to display his knowledge, whether about blubber, whales, or ambergris. This assertion of authority is then juxtaposed with very unclear, ambiguous ideas that surround the whaling world. Therefore, Melville must be implying in an extremely roundabout way that no amount of knowledge could ever fully grasp the ungraspable phantom that is Moby Dick. Ishmael's constant ability to transform from a novice whaler looking for some fresh air to a professor of philosophy and whale anatomy is something the reader must keep in mind when putting his trust in Ishmael. Works Cited1. Cohen, Hennig. University of Pennsylvania. Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 3. "Antebellum <https://assignbuster.com/call-him-ishmael-the-reliability-and-authority-of-melvilles-omniscient-narrator/>

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