

MOBY DICK DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does the novel's narrator begin his story with "Call me Ishmael"? What does he tell you about himself in Chapter 1 that sets the stage for the rest of the tale?
2. How does Ishmael's relationship to Queequeg change from the time they meet to the sailing of the Pequod? How does their relationship further Melville's discussion of religion? Do you think religious conventions are replaced or subverted in some way?
3. Discuss the novel's philosophical subtext. How does this contribute to the basic plot involving Ahab's search for the whale? Is this Ishmael's purpose in the novel? Why does Ahab pursue Moby Dick so single-mindedly, when Captain Boomer of the *Samuel Enderby*, who also has lost an appendage to Moby Dick, does not have the same obsession?
4. Melville explores the divide between evil and virtue, justice, and vengeance throughout the novel. What, ultimately, is his conclusion? Who is Moby Dick? Good or evil? Does Ishmael's very detailed description of whales help determine their 'character'? What do you think Melville intended by developing such a vicious antagonism between Ahab and the whale?
5. Why does Ishmael digress from his story to meditate on the meaning of whiteness regarding the whale? (Ch. 42)
6. Melville was drawn to Nathaniel Hawthorne's work by what he described as its "Calvinistic sense of depravity," which meant speaking the truth in regard to the human condition. In Melville's unrelenting pursuit of truth, despite recognizing how elusive such a concept can be, he addresses themes such as class, race, identity, and ecology (impact on the natural world). Where do these topics appear?
7. Moby Dick is considered the great American novel, about America and about the world. It creates a microcosm of community and industry within the bounds of the ship. Discuss leadership, economic and personal goals, planning, teamwork, specialization and more. Discuss the role of women in the novel. What does their conspicuous absence mean in the overall context of the novel?
8. Why does the coffin prepared for Queequeg become Ishmael's life buoy once the Pequod sinks? Is there any symbolism in that? Why does he live when no one else does?