Moby Dick: Ishmael, as narrator and as character


INTRODUCTION

Although Herman Melville has succeeded with different works, there is not any doubt that it was Moby Dick the one that has become the most relevant. Even more, this piece of art is considered one of the most representatives American novels ever written.

In his book, Melville not only tells a whale-hunting story but also makes a detailed description of the different whale’s species and how they were hunting in the XIX century. The book is full of aspects which could be highlighted but, throughout these pages, the attention would be focused on one of the characters of the book, Ishmael, who is not only the main character but also is the narrator of the tale.

In order to clarify the given ideas, there are going to be presented several examples as well taken out from the Penguin Popular Classics Collection.
ISHMAEL, AS NARRATOR AND AS CHARACTER.

Ishmael is not only a character in the novel but also the narrator. Ishmael is the name that the narrator takes for himself. However, it is unclear whether or not this is his real name. His name has got biblical references. Ishmael was the name of the first son of Abraham in the Old Testament (Genesis 16:1–16; 21:10 ff.). The biblical Ishmael is disinherited and dismissed from his home in favour of his half-brother Isaac. He was born to a slave woman because Abraham believed his wife, Sarah, to be infertile; when God granted her a son, Isaac, Ishmael and his mother were turned out of Abraham's household. The name has come to symbolize orphans and social outcasts. Melville frequently employs biblical allusions as keys to understanding in the novel. The name suggests that the narrator is a drifter, a fellow of no particular family other than mankind.

1. Ishmael as narrator

The narrator is an observant young man from Manhattan, perhaps even as young as Melville was (twenty-one) when he first sailed as a crew member on the American whaler. Ishmael is a complex narrator, a humanist. He narrates in a combination of first and third person, describing events as he saw them and providing his own thoughts. Particularly in the first quarter of the book, Ishmael is an active character, telling the story as an involved first-person narrator:

- Beginning of chapter 3, page 30. There, he is narrating as a character who is watching what he is describing.

But he also tells the thoughts and feelings of the other characters only as an observer might deduce them. When he opens Moby-Dick with the words *Call me Ishmael*, it is as if he is giving notice that the
narrative voice in this novel is to be more obviously fictional. But often during the middle section of the voyage Ishmael’s voice recedes.

- Chapter 135, beginning of page 535. *The harpoon was darted*...

Ishmael resembles Melville himself in many ways. He is a literary, meditative type who sees their shipmates as just human beings while telling his stories with a wealth of philosophical reflection. Ishmael, like Melville, has a rich literary background that he brings to bear on his shipmates and their adventure. We find regressions not related to Ahab’s story: art, cetology, anatomy, literature, legality... Ishmael makes frequent references on a wide range of subjects from art, anatomy, geology, legal codes and literature showing that he is intelligent and well educated. However, he asserts that a whaling ship has been “[his] Yale College and [his] Harvard.” Although he is brought in as a literate man, he seems to be dedicated to nothing. That is the reason why it is so difficult to fit Ishmael. He seems to be an enigma.

- Chapter 1, page 24: *It touches one’s sense of honour, particularly if you come of an old established family in the land, the Van Rensselaers, or Randolphs, or Hardicanutes. And more than all, if just previous to putting your hand into the making the tallest boys stand in awe of you. The transition is a keen one, I assure you, from a schoolmaster to a sailor, and required a strong decoction of Seneca and the Stoics to enable you to grin and bear it.*

This fragment is supposedly to be one of fewest that talks about Ishmael previous life.

- End of Chapter 96: *There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness. And there is a Catskill eagle in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces. And even if he for ever flies within the gorge, that gorge is in the mountains; so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar.*

This image is representative of his philosophical assumptions. Here, he shows his habit of quickly turning from a literal subject to metaphorical implications. This passage is a warning against the escapism through daydreaming or suicide. It suggests that woe and madness can be advantageous states for one with greatness of soul. Ahab may be insane and “for ever . . . within the gorge,” but his inherent greatness makes his destruction more important than the mere existence—the “soar[ing]”—of other individuals.

- Beginning of chapter 32, page 137. He wants to introduce the reader in the world of cetology. Not even one member of the Pequod could talk about this with the same knowledge that Ishmael possesses. Even more, no one else aboard the Pequod possesses the proper combination of intellect and experience to tell this story.
Sometimes Ishmael disappears from the story for long stretches, replaced by soliloquies and dialogues from Ahab and other characters. An example can be found in pages from 509 to 535 which correspond to the three chases. Throughout these pages, there is no presence of Ishmael as character; there are dialogues among the characters and introductions made by the narrator. We should remember that it is the most important part of the book: the end and resolved of the story.

Although Ishmael is a central character in the story, he doesn’t reveal much about himself to the reader. Not even his name. Call me Ishmael is one of the best-known opening sentences in English language literature. However, he proposes this name as a way of using its biblical reference but we do not know if it is his real name.

The only fact that we certainly know is that he has gone to sea out of some deep spiritual malaise (page 22: Yes, as everyone knows, meditation and water are wedded for ever) and that shipping aboard a whaler is his version of committing suicide:

- Page 21: Then, I account it high time to get the sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship.

2. Ishmael as character

He is also a complex and ambiguous character. A newcomer to whaling, Ishmael serves as our eyes and ears aboard the Pequod.

He is also an open-minded character who is capable of change. He travels to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where he stays in a whalers’ inn. Since the inn is too full, he has to share a bed with a harpooner named Queequeg. When he first meets Queequeg, Ishmael is terrified because of his strange habits and shocking appearance (his body is covered with tattoos):

- Page 42: This wild cannibal sprang into bed with me. I sang out, I could not help it now; and giving a sudden grunt of astonishment he began feeling me.

He sees Queequeg as a stereotypical “heathen” and fears that he is about to be killed by a cannibal. However, Ishmael soon learns that Queequeg is one of the finest men he has ever known being kind, loyal, generous, wise and courageous. So, the two decide to work together on a whaling vessel:

- Page 42: “You gettee in”, he added, motioning to me with his tomahawk, and throwing the clothes to one side. He really did this in not only a civil way but a really kind and charitable way. I stood looking at him a moment. For all his tattooings he was on the whole a clean, comely looking cannibal.

Page 65: You cannot hide the soul (Chapter 10).
Together, they explore the rich possibilities existing in diversity. Ultimately, it is this acceptance that indirectly saves Ishmael’s life, thanks to Queequeg’s coffin. Ishmael is, at the end, the only witness alive to tell the tale.

As we said before, in the inn, both Ishmael and Queequeg sleep together. There are some theories which talk about the possible homosexuality between Ishmael and Queequeg. However, there is not a unique interpretation.

- Chapter 10: How it is I know not; but there is no place like a bed for confidential disclosures between friends. Man and wife, they say, there open the very bottom of their souls to each other; and some old couples often lie and chat over old times till nearly morning. Thus, then, in our hearts’ honeymoon, lay I and Queequeg—a cosy, loving pair.

Ishmael confirms his independent ways by telling us that:

1. he seeks no special rank aboard ship and would not want to be either a cook or a captain; he says that he has enough responsibility just taking care of himself:
   - Chapter 1, page 23. For my part, I abominate all honourable respectable toils, trials, and tribulations of every kind whatsoever. It is quite as much as I can do to take care of myself, without taking care of ships, barques, brigs, schooners, and what not.

2. Ishmael speaks of no family or even a last name. Ishmael’s isolation makes his one real friendship, with the Polynesian harpooner Queequeg, all the most important. This is consistent with the ending of the book in which only Ishmael survives, picked up by the whaling ship Rachel, which, searching after its own missing children, finds only
   - Epilogue: another orphan.

He is also fascinated with Ahab:

- Chapter 28, page 130: So powerfully did the whole grim aspect of Ahab affects me, and the livid brand 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 partly stood.
- Last paragraph of chapter 16. Ishmael talks about his first impressions about Ahab.

CONCLUSION

As one could appreciate, Ishmael as character is complex. He is presented as a very open-minded man who is also independent, without any trace of family and showing ambiguity at the beginning of the story as an open door to homosexuality- when he shares bed with Queequeg and fascinated with the captain Ahab. As narrator, he narrates in a combination of first and third person, describing in
detail events as he saw them and providing his own thoughts. Furthermore, Ishmael demonstrates a rich literary background as his author, showing his intelligence and well educated behaviour.

**Bibliografía**

http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moby-Dick


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**Moby Dick: Style**

**Titulo:** Moby Dick: Style. **Target:** estudiantes de Filología Inglesa. **Asignatura:** Literatura Inglesa. **Autor:** Rosa Arcos Jiménez, Licenciada en Filología Inglesa.

*Moby Dick* is a novel written by Herman Melville and published in 1851. It is considered one of the most representative works in American Literature. In *Moby Dick*, Melville develops different styles, such as Mark Twain or William Faulkner, using one or other depending of what he wanted to do.

Throughout these pages the most important styles will be presented as well as different examples which will illustrate and clarify the given ideas. These examples have been taken out from the novel published by Penguin Popular Classics Collection.

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![Image of Moby Dick scene]