***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 1 –Loomings***

***Summary:***

* The narrator introduces himself to the reader with one of the most famous first lines in literature: "Call me Ishmael."
* He begins his story "some years ago," at one particular moment when he decided to go on a sailing voyage.
* Ishmael explains that, whenever he feels depressed and suicidal, he always goes to sea.
* Ishmael claims that most people and most cultures around the world have a special attraction to water in general and the sea in particular.
* In Manhattan, he tells us, people crowd around the wharves, looking out at the sea and trying to get as close to it as possible. Niagara Falls is a major tourist destination. Ancient cultures in Persia and Greece worshipped the sea. You get the idea.
* Ishmael doesn’t want to go to sea as a passenger, because then he’d have to pay.
* He also doesn’t want to be in an important position, such as captain or cook, because then he’d have *responsibilities,* and that would really get him down (which, frankly, we can totally sympathize with).
* He just wants to be an ordinary sailor.
* Ishmael says that being a lowly sailor and getting ordered around does take some getting used to, especially if you’ve held a powerful position before—like, say, a *schoolteacher*. (We get the idea Ishmael’s been a schoolteacher.)
* However, Ishmael doesn’t mind being ordered around on board ship, because he knows that "everybody else is in one way or other served in much the same way—either in a physical or metaphysical point of view" (1.9). In other words, everybody’s got a boss, even if it’s just God.
* Ishmael especially likes getting paid instead of paying (who doesn’t?), which is another motivation for being a sailor.
* The last reason Ishmael chooses to be a sailor is that it involves exercise and fresh air.
* Although Ishmael has explained that going to sea and being a sailor are his decisions, he *also* says that going whaling instead of sailing on a merchant ship is his fate.
* *Still*, even though Ishmael thinks his participation in the whaling voyage is predetermined, he acknowledges that he wants to go, in part, to satisfy his genuine curiosity about these enormous, mysterious creatures we call whales.

***Brief Summary:***

The narrative of Moby-Dick begins with the famous brief sentence, “Call me Ishmael.” Ishmael, a sailor, describes a typical scene in New York City, with large groups of men gathering on their days off to contemplate the ocean and dream of a life at sea. He explains that he himself went to sea because, like these men, he was feeling a “damp, drizzly November in [his] soul” and craved adventure. Shunning anything too “respectable” (or expensive), he always ships as a common sailor rather than as a passenger.

***Critical Study:***

The novel begins with the famous statement by the book's narrator: "Call me [Ishmael](https://www.gradesaver.com/moby-dick/study-guide/character-list#ishmael)." He has the habit of going to sea whenever he begins to grow "hazy about the eyes." He goes to sea as a laborer, not as a Commodore, a Captain or a Cook, but as a simple sailor. He does so because he may be paid and because it affords him wholesome exercise and pure sea air.

The novel [Moby Dick](https://www.gradesaver.com/moby-dick) is one of the most ambitious in American literature, one which encompasses several genres and styles of writing. It is a travelogue, a character study and an allegory. Linking each of the episodes of the novel and bridging these various genres is the character Ishmael, the narrator of the novel and the lens from which the reader views the action of Melville's work. The first chapter establishes Ishmael as a prototype, a working man and observer who claims no defining characters; his simplicity is a key to the novel, for it places Ishmael as an everyman whose character is subordinate to the other characters and occurrences of the novel. The name Ishmael, however, imbues the novel with religious undertones that will prevail through the course of Moby Dick.

***Summary and Analysis Part by Part:***

***Summary Part 1:***

The novel begins with a famous sentence: “Call me [**Ishmael**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael).” The novel’s narrator, Ishmael, is a young man from New York City, who is preparing to go on a whaling voyage for several reasons—to make money, to entertain himself, and to leave behind what he considers the stifling confines of city life, which make him bored. Ishmael begins the novel with a long description of the relationship of water—rivers, lakes, and especially oceans—to man’s desire for freedom and beauty. Ishmael states that artists often incorporate water into their poems and paintings, and that men who work all day in offices in New York can be found staring at the water surrounding Manhattan when they leave the office.

***Analysis Part 1:***

There is an important ambiguity in that first line. For it is not entirely clear whether Ishmael is asking us simply to “refer” to him as Ishmael—perhaps as a pseudonym—or whether Ishmael is his given name. Ishmael, in the Hebrew Bible, was the son of Abraham and Hagar, Abraham’s servant, and was therefore the son passed over when Isaac was named Abraham’s primary heir. This is consistent with Ishmael’s sense of existing apart from society—that is, as a sailor, rather than on land. And it further forebodes his total aloneness at the end of the novel.

***Summary Part 2:***

[Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) further clarifies that he was looking to go to sea not as the commander of a vessel, nor as a tourist, but as a “simple sailor,” one who is paid for his time on the boat, and who can enjoy the “fresh air” and “exercise” a life at sea affords. Ishmael closes the chapter by wondering why, exactly, he chose to go on a whaling vessel at this particular moment in his life, and how he ended up finding the “white whale” so central to the ensuing narrative. Ishmael says he is not sure how the Fates acted in the way they did, but he feels that his presence on this boat (to be described later), with this captain and crew, was somehow preordained, even though it seemed, at the time, that he was determining the course of his life. He closes the chapter by saying that one “grand hooded phantom,” or whale, occupies his thoughts even to the present day.

***Analysis Part 2:***

Another of the novel’s themes is here introduced. On the one hand, a sailing vessel represents an opportunity to try one’s luck on the open seas, where everything seems permitted, and where the laws of the land do not entirely apply. But life at sea is also life on a small ship, without much freedom of physical movement, and according to the customs sailors have accumulated over a number of years. Ishmael also seems to believe that life at sea is governed by a sense of “fate” far larger than any one man’s control—that the wind, seas, and behavior of animals like whales are governed by some other, more powerful force.