

Worksheet 4. Comparing Introductions: Ishmael and Ahab (teacher version)

Compare the first-person introduction of Ishmael in "Loomings," chapter 1, with Ahab's introduction in "Sunset," chapter 37. Remember to support your answers with textual evidence from both chapters.

1. How does each character introduce himself? Identify how the introductions are similar and how they are different.

Ishmael: "Though I cannot tell why it was exactly that those stage managers, the Fates, put me down for this shabby part of a whaling voyage, when others were set down for magnificent parts in high tragedies, and short and easy parts in genteel comedies, and jolly parts in farces—though I cannot tell why this was exactly; yet, now that I recall all the circumstances, I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which being cunningly presented to me under various disguises, induced me to set about performing the part I did, besides cajoling me into the delusion that it was a choice resulting from my own unbiased freewill and discriminating judgment."

Ahab: "What I've dared, I've willed; and what I've willed, I'll do! [...] That's more than ye, ye great gods, ever were."

*Both are from the first-person perspective of the character described.
Both deal with issues of free will and fate.*

These introductions express the differences in the life stage and station of each figure. Even the chapter titles reflect this. Ishmael is at beginning of his adult life without much responsibility. ("It is quite as much as I can do to take care of myself..." "I go as a simple sailor...") Ahab is in his sunset years, but is not able to enjoy the present due to events from his past driving him on. ("I leave a white and turbid wake..." "The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run....unerringly I rush.")

2. How does Ishmael's approach to life differ from Ahab's?

Ishmael lets things happen to him ("that those stage managers, the Fates, put me down for this shabby part of a whaling voyage.")

Ahab makes things happen ("What I've dared, I've willed; and what I've willed, I'll do!")

3. How do Ishmael and Ahab's purposes on this voyage differ? What are Ishmael's reasons for going to sea? What is Ahab's rationale for making the voyage?

Ishmael states the following reasons for going to sea:

It is elemental to our natures ("we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans.").

It is a healthy life-style ("because of the wholesome exercise and pure air of the fore-castle deck.")

It is fate – he is answering his destiny ("formed part of the grand programme of Providence that was drawn up a long time ago.").

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The prospect of the whale voyage and the larger than life experience it offers entices him ("the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself ...").

The call of the wild and exotic places ("the wild and distant seas...with all the attending marvels of a thousand Patagonian sights and sounds, helped to sway me to my wish.").

The lure of adventure and far off places ("I am tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote. I love to sail forbidden seas, and land on barbarous coasts.").

He will go along with seemingly anything ("however the old sea-captains may order me about—however they may thump and punch me about, I have the satisfaction of knowing that it is all right.")

Ahab states the following rationale for this voyage:

He has set a new revenge prophecy for himself by going after the whale that took his leg ("I now prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer.").

He is fixated on this hunt for the whale, and nothing will distract him from his path ("Swerve me? The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run").

Though he sees the sea as a paradise, he believes himself to be condemned to suffer eternal punishment on it ("...damned in the midst of Paradise!").