

# Teacher Guide

In the Heart of the Sea by Nathaniel Philbrick





Dear Teachers,

We cannot imagine the stress and headache you went through amid the transition to online school. Congratulations for finishing the school year! You did it! You put your own fear aside to ensure your students' education was not sacrificed.

Your hardwork and dedication did not go unnoticed by the Big Read committee. We have created an in depth teacher guide for *In the Heart of the Sea*, so you can teach this amazing novel with ease. This packet is an easy to use recourse with everything you may need. We want to ensure that participating in the Big Read is a breeze this year.

In this packet you will find a character list, theme list, discussion questions, and more. We hope you and your class enjoy this novel as much as we did!

Sincerely,  
The Big Read Committee

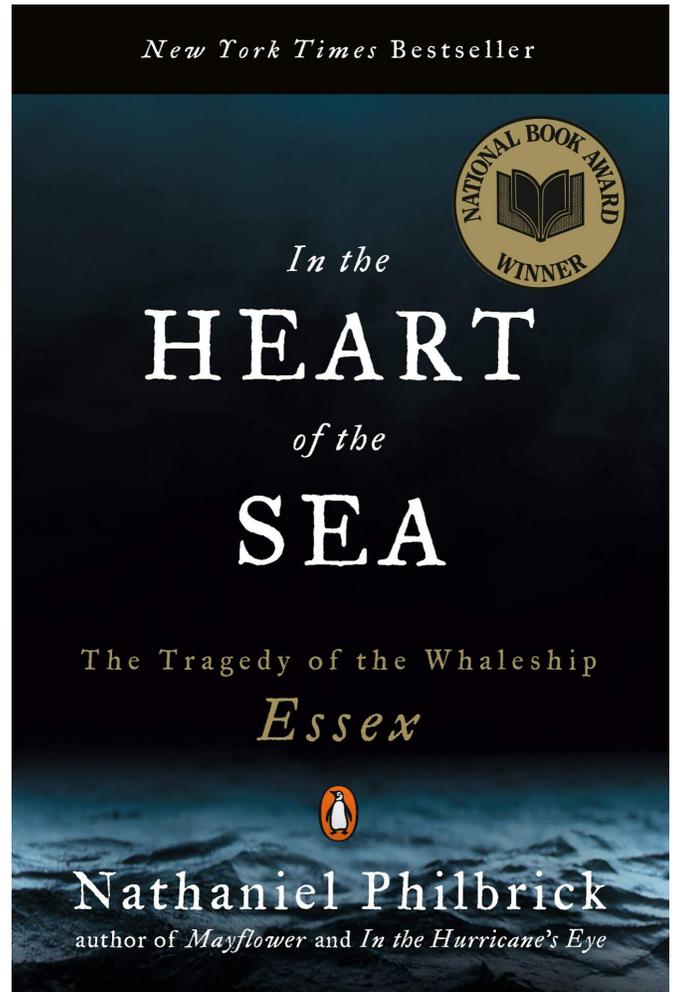


# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents.....	2
About the Author.....	3
Character List.....	4
Themes.....	6
Important Quotes.....	8
Discussion Questions.....	10
Essay Prompts.....	12
Related Articles and Videos.....	13
Contemporary Issues.....	15
Not Teaching the Whole Book?.....	
If You Like In the Heart of the Sea Then You May Like...16	
More by Nathaniel Philbrick.....	17



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR: NATHANIEL PHILBRICK



# About the Author: Nathaniel Philbrick

Nathaniel Philbrick grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he attended Linden Elementary School and Taylor Allderdice High School. He earned a BA in English from Brown University and an MA in American Literature from Duke University, where he was a James B. Duke Fellow. He was Brown University's first Intercollegiate All-American sailor in 1978, the same year he won the Sunfish North Americans in Barrington, RI. After working as an editor at Sailing World magazine, he wrote and edited several books about sailing, including *The Passionate Sailor*, *Second Wind*, and *Yaahting, A Parody*.

In 1986, Philbrick moved to Nantucket with his wife Melissa and their two children. In 1994, he published his first book about the island's history, *Away Off Shore*, followed by a study of the Nantucket's native legacy titled *Abram's Eyes*. He is the founding director of the Egan Maritime Institute and a research fellow at the Nantucket Historical Association.

In 2000, he published the New York Times bestseller, *In the Heart of the Sea*, winner of the National Book Award for nonfiction, followed by *Sea of Glory*, winner of the Theodore and Franklin D. Roosevelt Naval History Prize and the Albion-Monroe Award from the National Maritime Historical Society, and *Mayflower*, finalist for both the 2007 Pulitzer Prize in History and the Los Angeles Times Book Award and winner of the Massachusetts Book Award for nonfiction. His writing has also appeared in *Vanity Fair*, the *New York Times Book Review*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Boston Globe*. He has appeared on the *Today Show*, the *Morning Show*, *Dateline*, PBS's *American Experience*, *C-SPAN*, and *NPR*.



# CHARACTER LIST



# Character List

Provided by GradSaver

## **George Pollard, Jr.**

First-time captain, but long-time sailor aboard the Essex, George Pollard, Jr. is unable to assert autocratic rulership when his crew needs it most after the sinking of the whaleship.

## **Owen Chase**

First mate of the Essex, Owen Chase, is after Pollard's job. He proves himself capable after the sinking of the ship when he saves the majority of his sailors on the whaleboat, surviving four months at sea.

## **Matthew Joy**

Second mate, Matthew Joy, does not survive the adventure due to his undiagnosed sickness. He was married to a girl outside of the Society of Friends back on Nantucket, but this did not alienate him from his fellow Nantucketers aboard the Essex.

## **Thomas Chappel**

A boat steerer who stayed back on Henderson Island.

## **Benjamin Lawrence**

A boat steerer who was incapable of harpooning the whale, breaking into tears instead.

## **Owen Coffin**

Nephew of George Pollard, Jr., who was asked to take care of him on this journey. He was shot and killed by his best friend, Charles Ramsdell, after suggesting that the men 'cast lots'.

Charles Ramsdell

Best friend and shooter of Owen Coffin after lots were unluckily cast aboard the whaleboats almost four months at sea.

## **Thomas Nickerson**

Cabin boy, who was only 14 years old at the onset of the journey. He became a well-known lodger in Nantucket and his version of the tale was published over 100 years after Chase's and Pollard's.

## **Isaac Cole**

A sailor who went insane before his death on the whaleboat. The men were extremely reluctant to use his body for food.

## **Other Sailors**

Henry De Witt / Richard Peterson / Barzillai Ray / Samuel Reed / Isaiah Sheppard / Charles Shorter / Lawson Thomas / Seth Weeks / Joseph West / William Wright  
Although these men may have played larger roles in the events of the journey, their names are hardly mentioned in the narratives of Nickerson, Chase, and Pollard more than a handful of times. For example, Peterson was among the first to die, so his body became important to the other sailors after he ceased being a character.



# THEMES



# Themes

Provided by GradSaver

## Hope

The easiest theme to grasp in this tragic and exhausting tale is the collective infatuation with the possibility of survival. Without that tiny shred of hope that they would reach the coast of South America, that the wind might pick up, and that the misery was worth it in the end, the sailors never would have been able to see Nantucket again.

## Final Hours Before Death

As many sailors perish throughout the book, there is a large focus on the last moments of their lives and subsequently on the crew's reaction to the death. Barring Isaac Cole's manic episode, most of the men died very peacefully and left the crew in a somber, but somewhat neutral solitude. The fact of death is not a phenomenon experienced only by sea-locked sailors, but rather is something that everybody has to face in their lifetimes, so this theme is particularly relatable to any reader.

## Predator/Prey Dichotomy

The book's story is always phrased in terms of the pursuer and the pursued, or better yet, the predator and the prey. When the Essex is sunk by its own prey, it is the sailors who become preyed upon and the sharks of the ocean that become the predators.

## Morality

The sailors face the most extreme situations imaginable within the experience of humanity, which puts them in direct contact with the situations that most of us have only considered jokingly in a hypothetical question like in the "would you rather" game. Philbrick fills the reader in on many of the options that the men never considered, such as using the first man's body as bait so that they could catch sea-creatures to eat instead of resorting to cannibalism. But hindsight is 20/20.

## Leadership

Philbrick brings in scientific models for effective disaster responses to render this tale into not only a tragedy, but also a lesson from which there is much to be learned. One example is when Pollard elects a more democratic model of leadership directly after the ship sinks, which disaster psychologists warn against for many reasons. Chase, on the other hand, often employs a healthy combination of authoritative assertion and empathy with his crew. Philbrick also discusses the role of active and passive leadership styles and the psychological change that occurred in Nantucketers when they left land, employing a 'fishy' or fierce leadership style unknown to their land contemporaries.

## Available Information

One of the poorest excuses for the deaths of so many of the sailors was the lack of knowledge on the part of the captain and mates. Had they researched the readily available information about Tahiti, the Society Islands, Hawaii, or even the wind patterns of the region, they never would have had such misfortune. Nantucketers were tragically skeptical of knowledge that came from lips other than their own.

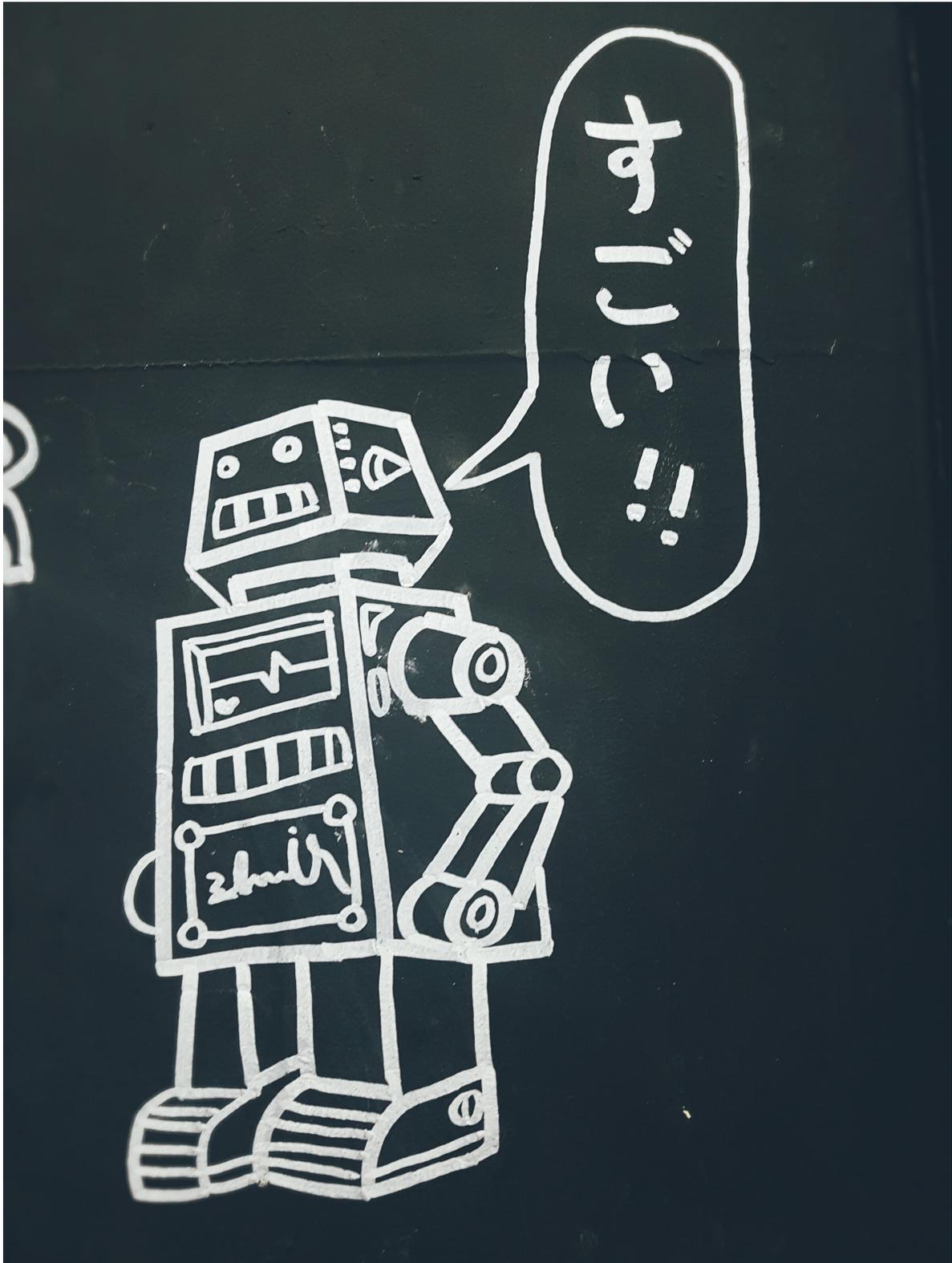


## **Identity**

While this book cannot account for each character the way Melville could in his fictionalized account, the role of identity was huge for the main characters: Chase, Nickerson, and Pollard. When their eyes shrunk into their heads and their cheek bones protruded with the onset of their extreme thirst, they all began to look similar. They were no longer Chase, Nickerson, and Pollard, but rather, Boat Captain 2, Boat Captain 1, and Crewmember, respectively.



# IMPORTANT QUOTES



# Important Quotes

"A Nantucket whaleman kept his clothing in a 'chist.' His harpoons were kept 'shurp,' especially when 'atteking' a 'lirge' whale. A 'keppin' had his own 'kebbin' and was more often than not a 'merrid' man, while a 'met' kept the ship's log for the entire 'viege.'" (Philbrick 22)

"He was six years younger than Captain Pollard, but Chase felt he had already mastered everything he needed to know to perform Pollard's job. The first mate's cocksure attitude would make it difficult for Pollard, a first-time captain just emerging from the long shadow of a respected predecessor, to assert his own style of command." (Philbrick 30-31)

"Do for heaven's sake spring. The boat don't move. You're all asleep; see, see! There she lies; skote, skote! I love you, my dear fellows, yes, yes, I do; I'll do anything for you, I'll give you my heart's blood to drink; only take me up to this whale only this time, for this once, pull. Oh, St. Peter, St. Jerome, St. Stephen, St. James, St. John, the devil on two sticks; carry me up; O, let me tickle him, let me feel of his ribs. There, there, go on; O, O, O, most on, most on. Stand up, Starbuck [the harpooner]. Don't hold your iorn that way; put one hand over the end of the pole. Now, now, look out. Dart, dart." (Philbrick 51)

"The crew was staring at this legendary sphinxlike sight when suddenly it dissolved in the hazy air. It had been nothing but a fog bank." (Philbrick 62)

"One naval architect's calculations project that if the Essex had been a new ship, her oak planking would have withstood even this tremendous blow. Since the whale did punch a hole in the bow, the Essex's twenty-one-year-old planking must have been significantly weakened by rot or marine growth." (Philbrick 89)

"The same men who had worked so cheerfully at modifying the whaleboats were suddenly bludgeoned by despair. '[T]he miseries of their situation came upon them with such force,' Chase remembered, 'as to produce spells of extreme debility, approaching almost to fainting.' Even though it had been almost two days since their last meal, they found it impossible to eat. Their throats parched by anxiety, they indulged instead in frequent drinks of water." (Philbrick 94)

"Only a Nantucketer in November 1820 possessed the necessary combination of arrogance, ignorance, and xenophobia to shun a beckoning (albeit unknown) island and choose instead an open-sea voyage of several thousand miles" (Philbrick 100)

"The act of self-expression - through writing a journal or letters - often enables a survivor to distance himself from his fears. After beginning his informal log, Chase would never again suffer another sleepless night tortured by his memory of the whale." (Philbrick 109)

"That night the officers agreed that if they should ever become separated again, no action would be taken to reassemble the convoy." (Philbrick 120)

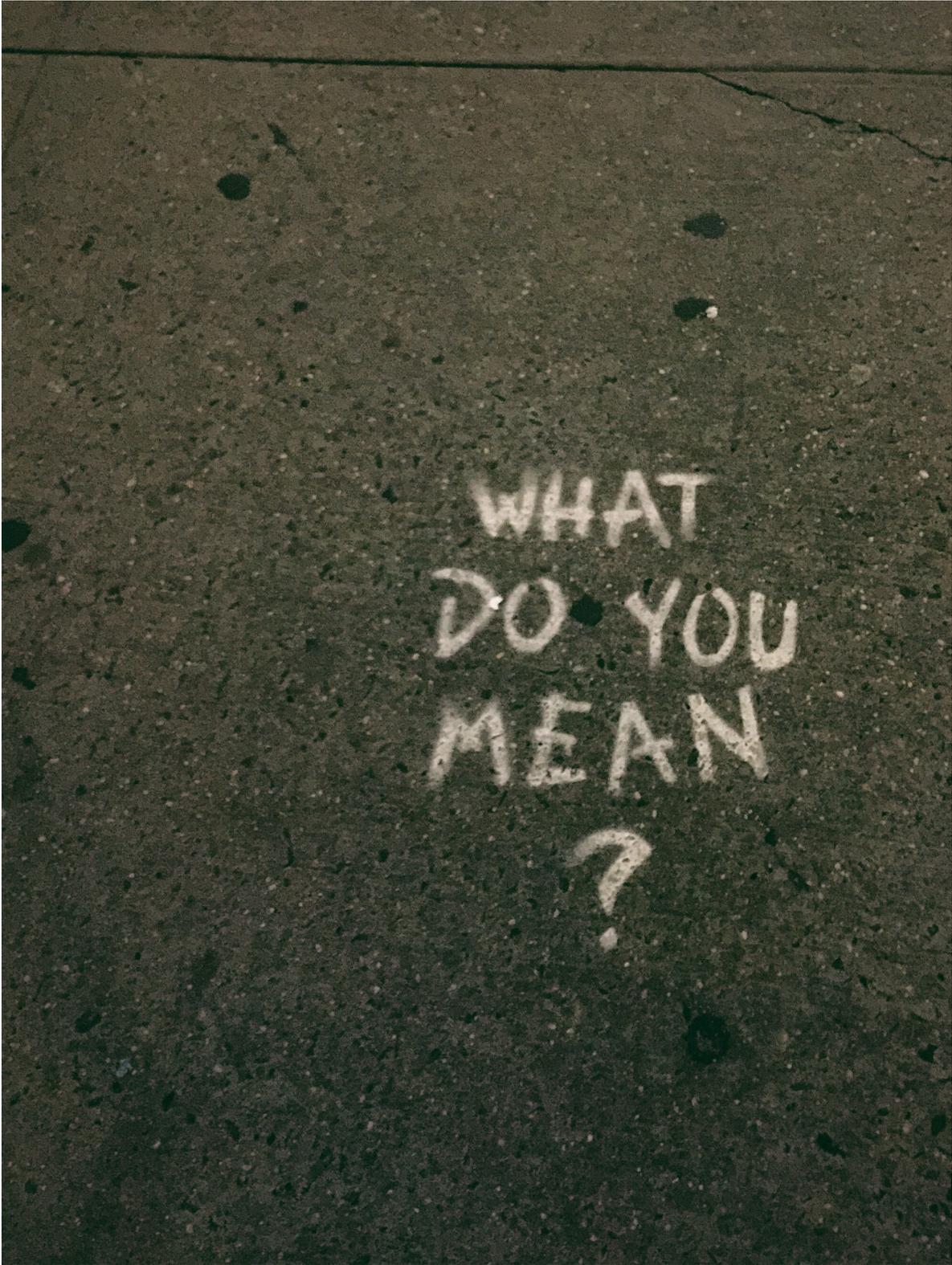


"Before he died, Coffin spoke a parting message to his mother, which Pollard promised to deliver if he should make it back to Nantucket. Then Coffin asked for a few moments of silence. After reassuring the others that "the lots had been fairly drawn," he lay his head down on the boat's gunwale. 'He was soon dispatched,' Pollard would later recall, 'and nothing of him left.'" (Philbrick 176)

"[T]here was a sudden and unaccountable earnestness in his manner,' [Chase] wrote, 'that alarmed me, and made me fear that I myself might unexpectedly be overtaken by a like weakness, or dizziness of nature, that would bereave me at once of both reason and life.'" (Philbrick 184)



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



# Discussion Questions

1. In your opinion, why does Pollard choose to take another whaling job after the Essex disaster?
2. Is whaling ethical? Why or why not?
3. What do you think happened to Henry De Witt?
4. If you were an Essex survivor, would you have kept sailing, or would you have remained on Henderson Island?
5. Do you find the eyewitness accounts of the Essex disaster to be accurate? Explain your answer.
6. Whalers were considered the explorers of the sea. Why? What were some of the dangers associated with seafaring groups in the 1820's and how did this prepare the men of the Essex for their journey after the attack?
7. When the crew was rescued from the lifeboats (and island), what was the general sentiment of their rescuers? How did the people of Nantucket view the crew and Captain Pollard after they returned? How was Pollard viewed by his crew and his family? Do you think they were judged fairly?
8. Why do you think the whale attacked the Essex? In later years, as mentioned in the Epilogue, several more attacks by whales occurred. Sperm whales have the largest brain of any animal on earth. Do you believe they were provoked?
9. In 1869, less than 50 years after the Essex tragedy, the last whaling ship left Nantucket. Once the whaling capital of the world, the downfall marked the end of an era. What caused the downfall? How has the legacy been remembered in Nantucket? If you were Captain Pollard or a member of the crew, how would you want to be remembered?
10. Did you know the story of the Essex before you read *In the Heart of the Sea*? Were you familiar with the U.S.'s history of whaling? If not, you'd be in good company. Why do you think this piece of American history that was so well known in the 19th century is not as well known today? If you did know the story, how did the book enhance or change your perception of what happened?
11. How would you describe the roles and motivations of the women on the island in comparison to the men? How do those roles compare to what you know or imagine were the roles of other 19th century American men and women?
12. Whaling was a large and profitable business in the U.S. in the early to mid-19th century. Can you think of modern-day businesses or industries that operate in similar ways to the whaling industry back then? In what ways?
13. Philbrick and other historians have questioned Captain George Pollard's decisions at critical moments during the voyage to quell his own instincts and follow the advice of his officers. Can you think of any specific actions or decisions of his that contributed to the voyage's disastrous outcome? Are there actions he took throughout the journey that were effective or appropriate to the situation? What do you think makes an effective leader?
14. What were the Nantucketers' attitudes toward their fellow crew members who were not from Nantucket? In what ways did these attitudes affect decisions made? How did they determine the trajectory of each crewmember's survival?
15. Some of the men chose to stay behind on the uninhabitable Henderson Island. Why? Would you have made the decision to stay?
16. How would you describe your survival instincts? Would you have done what some of these men ultimately did to stay alive?



1. Philbrick is careful not to use the word “adventure” when describing the story of the Essex and its crew. Why do you think this is? How do you define “adventure”? Do you think it applies to this story?
2. The book discusses a few potential reasons why the whale attacked the Essex. What are these and which do you believe to be true? Why was the notion of a vengeful whale so terrifying to Owen Chase? How do you think contemporary views of whaling differ from those in 1820? How would you explain this change in attitudes?
3. There are moments in the book where natural events are viewed by the author as metaphorical to the men’s experiences. Choose one or two and discuss how the metaphors illuminate the story. Also, discuss their importance to the narrative.
4. What was the difference in the leadership styles of George Pollard and Owen Chase? Did these differences contribute to the demise of the Essex or the eventual loss of lives? If so, how? Who do you think made a better leader and why?
5. What was the established hierarchy on the Essex? How did this reflect the social stratification of Nantucket?
6. Did race have anything to do with who lived or died on the Essex? How?

Provided by various sources including: NEA Big Read, nathanielphilbrick.com, Shmoop, and CBGS



# ESSAY PROMPTS



# Essay Prompts

- Charles Darwin's Evolution ideas centered upon the Galapagos Islands, a provision stop for whalers in the 1800's. Besides depleting the whale population, whalers (including the Essex crew) had a large impact on Galapagos animal and plant life. Briefly discuss this impact making connections to Darwinian ideas. Is it possible that the sperm whale attack (and later shark and killer whale attacks) as well as the men's suffering could be Divine payback? (Provided by cbgs)
- Captain George Pollard and First Mate Owen Chase were instrumental in the decision making for the Essex crew, yet they each had a very different style. As you read through the book make a list of the decisions each made before and after the attack (include each of their views and the decision made if there was disagreement). Do you think differences in decision-making contributed to the demise of the Essex or the eventual loss of life? Explain. Who made the best decisions? Who was a better leader? (provided by cbgs)
- What role does race play in this story? (provided by GradSaver)
  - This is a great scholarly article to pair with this essay prompt
  - [Slow Boat to Nowhere: The Multi-Racial Crews of the American Whaling Industry](#)
- Nonfiction storytellers employ a variety of techniques to deepen their narratives. They provide context, varying points of view, facts, and visuals. They may also use descriptive language, dialogue, metaphor, and a steady dose of action to keep the narrative compelling. Which of these elements does Philbrick employ in *In the Heart of the Sea* and how does he integrate them to keep his story both interesting and historically accurate? (provided by NEA Big Read)



# RELATED ARTICLES AND VIDEOS



# Related Articles and Videos

## **Shipwrecks in Michigan- pair with chapter five**

- The sinking of the Essex was a horrible tragedy but not a rare occurrence. Evidence of shipwrecks riddle our ocean floors. They even can be found in our very own Great Lakes. This article provides pictures and descriptive information about 12 shipwrecks that can be found at the bottom of the Great Lakes.
  - [Dive into Michigan Shipwrecks at these 12 Underwater Preserves](#)
- If you would like to learn about shipwrecks that occurred specifically in Michigan, this article includes 8 famous shipwrecks in Lake Michigan.
  - [8 Famous Shipwrecks on Lake Michigan](#)

## **Cannibalism- pair with chapter eleven**

- Want to take a closer look at cannibalism? Curious as to how a human being could resort to such behavior? Read “The Rules for Cannibalism on The High Seas” to find more about cannibalism; specifically cannibalism when stranded at sea.
  - [The Rules for Cannibalism on The High Seas](#)
- While cannibalism is revolting and makes one's stomach churn, it is a fascinating topic. It sparks curiosity and can fuel the imagination. “10 Things You Always Wondered About Cannibalism” answers ten questions about cannibalism. These questions include when did humans start eating each other, is eating another person against the law, what does the Bible say about cannibalism, and seven more fascinating questions. Check out this article to read more.
  - [10 Things you Always Wondered About Cannibalism](#)
- This TedTalk gives a great history about cannibalism in video format.
  - [A brief history of cannibalism - Bill Schutt](#)

## **Whales- pair with chapter three**

- The whale that sank the Essex was a sperm whale. To find more about sperm whales check out this article.
  - [Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife](#)
- The sperm whale that attacked and sank the Essex exhibited aggressive behavior, but how common is aggressive behavior in sperm whales? Read this article to find out.
  - [How realistic are the vengeful whales of “Moby-Dick” and “In the Heart of the Sea,” really?](#)
- Pair with chapter five
- Short video discussing 5 facts about sperm whales
  - [5 Amazing Facts You Didn't Know About Sperm Whales](#)

## **Whaling and Whale Oil- pair with chapter two**

- The way Philbrick describes Nantucket makes it seem almost fiction, but it is as real as New York City. This article dives into the history of Nantucket. It answers questions like how did Nantucket become the whaling capital and what life on Nantucket was like.
  - [The Real Story Behind "In the Heart of the Sea" | History](#)
- Multi-racial crews on whaling ships were not unique to Nantucket's industry but common in America. This scholarly article is a great resource to use when discussing the role race plays in the novel.



- [Slow Boat to Nowhere: The Multi-Racial Crews of the American Whaling Industry](#)
- The Atlantic provides a stimulating article about the American whaling industry. This easy to read article is a great way to gain valuable context about whaling.
  - [The Spectacular Rise and Fall of U.S. Whaling: An Innovation Story](#)
- Fascinating video about the whale oil industry in Nantucket.
  - [Nantucket Whaling Industry- NHD by Lexi Linton](#)

### **Context- pair with chapter one**

- What was going on in America in the 1800's? What was going on in the world? This page provides a decade by decade timeline of the 1800's.
  - [Decade by Decade Timeline of the 1800s](#)
- Want a timeline specifically regarding the American whaling industry? Check out this article.
  - [The History of Whaling in America | American Experience](#)

### **Moby-Dick- pair with chapter fourteen**

- Moby Dick by Herman Melville inspired Philbrick to write In the Heart of the Sea. This New York Times article dives into the Philbrick's inspiration and writing process, the similarities of the books, and how they relate.
  - [Resurrecting The Tale That Inspired and Sank Melville](#)
- BuzzFeed is a popular youtube channel among middle and high schoolers. Did you know they made a video about the historical shipwreck that inspired Moby Dick? It provides factual information while providing entertainment.
  - [The Horrifying Shipwreck That Inspired Moby Dick](#)



# CONTEMPORARY ISSUES



# Contemporary Issues

The majority of *In the Heart of the Sea* takes place at sea. We read about how unforgiving the sea can be. While the ocean can be unforgiving, frightening, and dangerous, it also possesses diverse marine life, the largest mountain range on earth, and beautiful coral reefs. This brings up the topic of ocean conservation. Below you will find several articles that discuss why the ocean is so important, the great garbage patch, and why we need to protect it.

- [Great Pacific Garbage Patch](#)
- [Garbage Patches](#)
- [The Great Pacific Garbage Patch Explained | Research | The Ocean Cleanup](#) (video 2:40)
- [Dying Coral Reefs Impact Environment and Economy](#)
- [New science could save dying coral reefs, in the Great Barrier Reef and beyond](#)
- [What Would Happen If All The Coral Reefs Died Off?](#) (video 2:50)
- [Our Incredible Ocean: Now Is the Time to Protect It | National Geographic](#) (video 6:08)
- [The Importance of Our Oceans \(feat. Dr. Steve Simpson\)](#) (video 4:39)
- [Why the Ocean?](#) (video 2:02)

Now that we know how important the ocean is and how polluted it has become, let's look at how we can conserve our ocean.

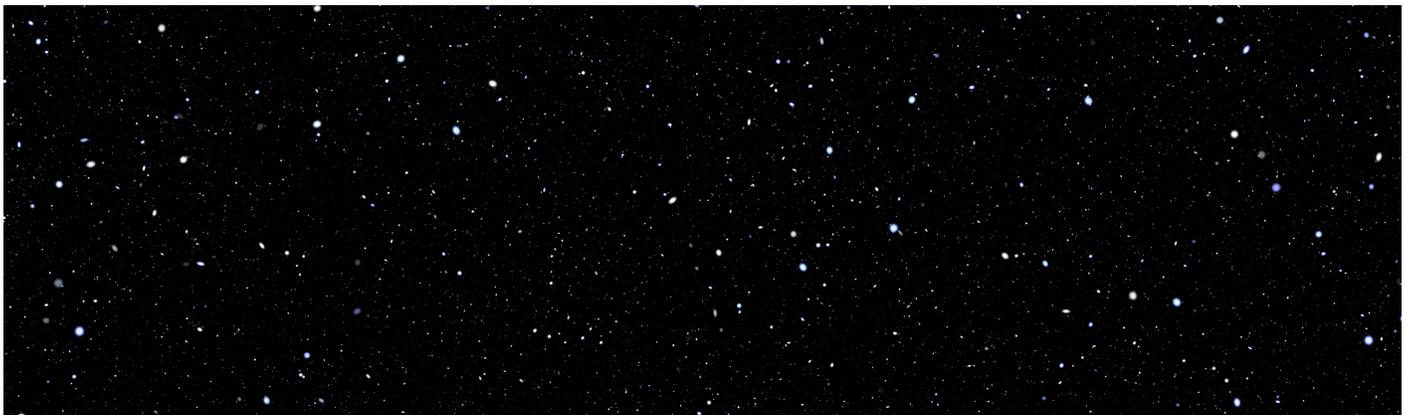
- [How Can We Clean Up the Oceans?](#) (video 4:22)
- [how to save our oceans](#) (video 3:02)
- [The surprising solution to ocean plastic | David Katz](#) (video 11:53)





Navigation at sea is a recurring theme in *In the heart of the Sea*. How has navigation evolved from the 1800's to today? Check out these articles and videos to find out.

- [Navigation \(National Geographic- navigation at sea through the years\)](#)
- [6 Creative Ways People Used to Navigate the Oceans \(video 10:27\)](#)



Today, space exploration is the new ocean exploration. We have turned our eyes from the open seas to the stars.

- [Astronaut Chris Hadfield Debunks Space Myths | WIRED \(video 11:32\)](#)
- [These are the benefits of space exploration- CNN \(video 7:06\)](#)
- [Why We Explore-NASA](#)





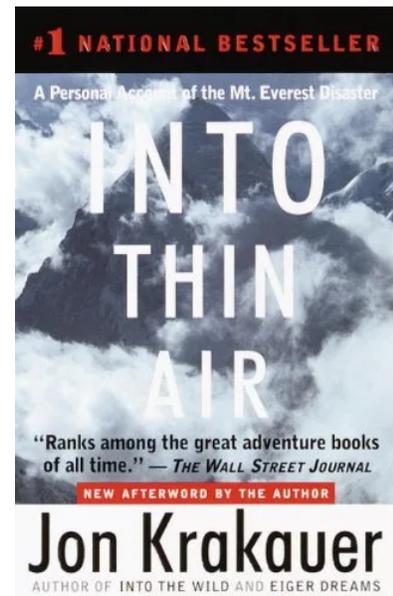
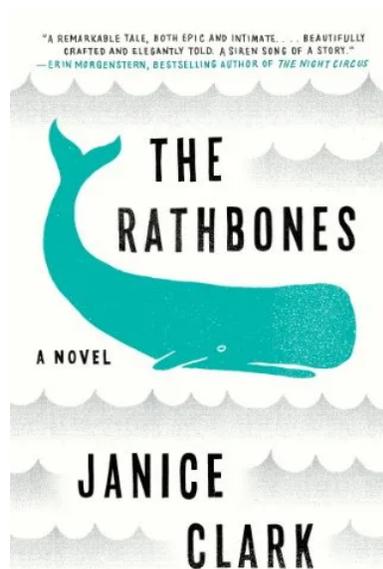
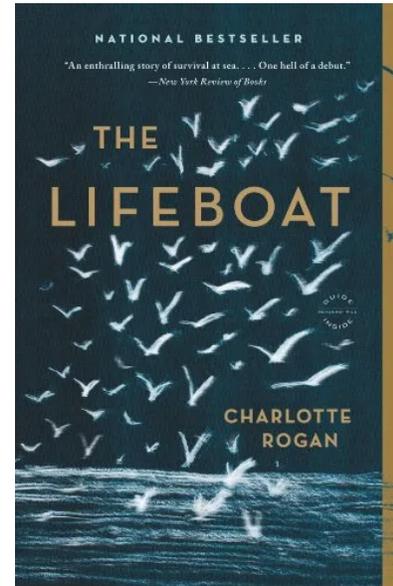
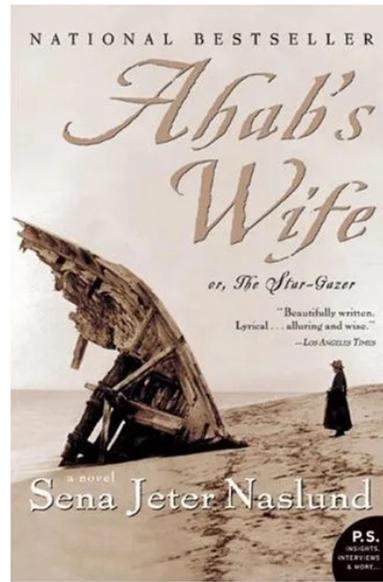
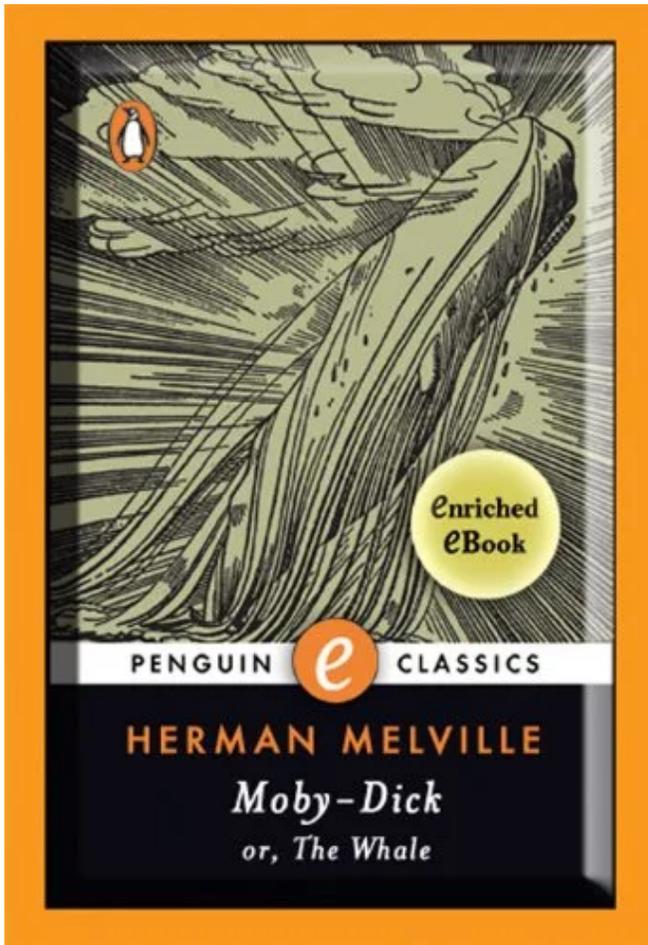
# Not Teaching the Whole Book?

Do you want to participate in the Big Read but do not have enough time to teach the entire book? We understand, so here is a compilation of the important chapters and their significance. We are happy you decided to participate in the Big Read this year!

- **Chapter One:** Chapter one provides an essential introduction to the island of Nantucket. Many major characters are introduced in chapter one. Further, this chapter introduces readers to the importance of whales, whaling, and whale oil.
- **Chapter Three:** This chapter is not necessary, but it provides a detailed recount of how a whale was killed and harvested for its blubber.
- **Chapter Five:** Perhaps the most important chapter in the novel, chapter five consists of the whale attack that caused the whaleship Essex to sink.
- **Chapter Nine:** Chapter nine is a chapter of lost hope. In this chapter the crew discovers an island; however, it is later found to be uninhabitable. Three whalers decide to stay on this island.
- **Chapter Eleven:** If you decide to discuss the topic of cannibalism this is an important chapter. Further, this chapter is vital to understand the hardships the Essex crew endured.
- **Chapter Twelve:** In this chapter Owen Chase's crew is finally rescued by another whaleship.
- **Chapter thirteen:** This chapter does a good job bring the book full circle. This chapter describes what happens to the crew after they are rescued. It only discusses the days and weeks after the rescue. If you would like a more detailed depiction on how the crew survives in the years after the shipwreck, that information can be found in chapter fourteen.



# If You Like In the Heart of the Sea Then You May Like...



# More by Nathaniel Philbrick

