In the Heart of the Sea

Questions to consider:

1. In 1820, Nantucket was a Quaker town. What do Quakers believe? Was it hypocritical (a hypocrite is a person who pretends to have virtues or qualities that he or she does not have) of a Quaker community to take part in such a violent occupation as whaling?
2. Why did the Essex survivors avoid the South Pacific Islands when they were so close to them. What factors - historical, cultural, and otherwise - contributed to the decision to take a longer route home?
3. With what you have learned about the people of Nantucket and the whalemen in particular, can you explain their fearlessness in the face of nature? And, in opposition, their great fear of strange human beings? How is our world different today?
4. The book discusses a few potential reasons for why the whale attacked the Essex. What are these and which do you believe to be true? Why was the idea of a vengeful whale so terrifying to Owen Chase? How do you think contemporary (today’s) views of whaling differ from those in 1820? How would you explain this change in attitude?
5. There are times in the book where natural elements 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 - why does the author include figurative language in nonfiction writing?
6. What was the difference in the leadership styles of George Pollard and Owen Chase? Did these differences contribute to the demise (an ending of existence) of the Essex or the eventual loss of lives? If so, how? Who do you think made a better leader and why?
7. What was the established hierarchy (persons or things arranged in ranks or classes) on the Essex? How did this reflect the social stratification (being arranged in layers or strata) of Nantucket?
8. Did race have anything to do with who lived or died on the Essex? How?
9. *In the Heart of the Sea* has been optioned by a production company to be made into a feature film. Imagine you are the screenwriter chosen to adapt the book. What are the central dramatic situations you would choose and who would be your main character? Is there a clear protagonist? Is there a clear antagonist?