***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 2 –The Carpet Bag***

***Summary:***

* Ishmael packs a few things into a carpetbag (carpetbags were used stereotypically by people who traveled often) and heads from Manhattan to New Bedford, Massachusetts.
* He intends to take the ferry from here to Nantucket, but he’s too late. He’s stuck in New Bedford for the night.
* Ishmael explains that New Bedford is becoming the new center of the whaling trade, but he’d rather sail from Nantucket, because that place has older and more prestigious connections with whaling. Ishmael’s a bit of a snob.
* Sadly, Ishmael doesn’t have much money, so he wanders around for a long time looking for the cheapest possible place to spend the night.
* Ishmael wanders into the poorest, most deserted streets near the water, rejecting "The Crossed Harpoons" and "The Sword-Fish Inn" as too expensive.
* He goes into what he thinks might be a cheap inn, but it turns out to be "a n\*\*\*\* church" (2.6).
* Finally Ishmael finds a place called "The Spouter Inn," run by someone unfortunately named Peter Coffin. (Bad omen? You decide.)
* The Spouter Inn is sort of New Bedford’s version of the fleabag motel—it looks run-down, but it’ll get the job done cheaply.
* Before Ishmael enters "The Spouter Inn," he spends a moment feeling sorry for himself and brooding about the difference between cold wind when you’re looking out of your warm house at it and cold wind when you’re standing right in the middle of it.
* Then, he snaps himself out of this self-indulgent attitude and heads on in.

***Brief Summary:***

Ishmael travels from New York to New Bedford, Massachusetts, the whaling capital of the United States. He arrives too late to catch the ferry to Nantucket, the original whaling center of New England; for the sake of tradition, Ishmael wants to sail in a Nantucket whaler. For now, however, he has to spend a few nights in New Bedford. He roams the streets looking for an inn, but those that he finds seem too expensive. He stumbles into, then quickly out of, a church full of wailing and weeping African Americans, where a sermon is being preached on “the blackness of darkness.” Ishmael finally wanders into the Spouter-Inn, owned by Peter Coffin. The ominous name of the inn and the owner satisfy his mood, and the place is dilapidated and sure to be cheap.

***Analysis(Ch1-2):***

Ishmael arrives in New Bedford on his way to Nantucket to embark on a whaling voyage. He passes by several inns, including the "Sword-Fish Inn," "The Crossed Harpoons" and "The Trap" before reaching "The Spouter Inn," where he chooses to rest that night.

The religious undertones of Moby Dick continue through this second chapter, in which Ishmael travels from inn to inn, searching for an appropriate place to stay for the night. This is a subtle reference that parallels the travels of Mary and Joseph, as Ishmael finally finds a place where he may stay, in equally questionable accommodations.

***Critical Study(Ch1-2):***

In this initial chapter, we meet Ishmael, the main character and narrator of the novel. Ishmael has come to the point in his life where he desires something different from his life as a schoolmaster and decides to hire on as a sailor on a whaling ship. He discusses in a rather conversational way the draw of the sea upon all men as well as the reasons behind his decision to hire onto a ship instead of going as a paying passenger.

As the story continues in the second chapter, Ishmael packs his bag and heads for Nantucket. He is waylaid in New Bedford looking for inexpensive lodgings until he can board a ship bound for Nantucket. Although New Bedford has surpassed Nantucket in the business of whaling, Ishmael only wishes to sail on a Nantucket ship. Since the first whale killed was hunted by aboriginal men in Nantucket, Ishmael sees this as the only place to join a whaling ship. Ishmael travels past two expensive looking taverns toward the seaward area of the town where he first accidentally wanders into a black church where the minister is delivering a message about darkness. He next finds a small, old inn called the Spouter Inn owned by Peter Coffin. Ishmael decides to spend his extra time here.

Chapter One gives the reader a look into Ishmael's personality. He is an intelligent person with a sense of humor and love for the sea. Ishmael desires something different from his job as a schoolmaster even though in his role as teacher he commands respect from his students. Ishmael is aware he will be bossed about on the whaling ship, but still desires a taste of this lifestyle. As the title of the chapter suggests, the reader gets a hint that Ishmael's experience on the whaling mission will not be the harmless adventure he seeks but will instead turn bloody and violent.

The theme of fate first appears in this chapter of the book. Ishmael suggests that fate was responsible for him choosing the whaling mission and that he has no free will of his own, only the ability to follow a plan that has already been lain out for him. In addition, the theme of Biblical imagery is introduced in this first chapter. Ishmael literally means "God has heard" and was the name given to Abraham's son through the maid Hagar. As told in the Bible story, Ishmael and Hagar were made to leave home when Abraham's wife Sarah became jealous of the two. Therefore, the name Ishmael also refers to orphans and outcasts.

Set on a dark, cold December night, the tone of the second chapter is bleak and foreboding. Ishmael's ship to Nantucket does not sail for two days, so he is forced to wander the cold deserted streets looking for an affordable place to stay. Ishmael describes the biting cold, deep frost and his lack of money in his usual conversational way. Peter Coffin, the name of the owner of the inn Ishmael chooses to stay reminds the reader Ishmael's tale will not be a happy one.

It is also important to note the numerous references to Biblical persons and occurrences in this chapter. Not only does Ishmael accidentally enter a Negro church while searching for an inn, but he also equates the ashes from the ash box over which he accidentally trips with the ashes from the Biblical sinful city of Gomorrah. This city was destroyed by God's wrath after fewer than ten just people were found living there. Ishmael also compares the cold night winds to the Euroclydon, the wind that supposedly wrecked Paul's ship in Malta.

***Critical Analysis(Ch1-2):***

As the novel opens, the narrator, a young man called Ishmael, expresses a yearning to lift his spirits with a sea voyage. Carrying only a change or two of clothing, he leaves his home in Manhattan and arrives in New Bedford, Massachusetts, on a cold Saturday night in December. From there, he hopes to catch a small boat to the historical port of Nantucket in order to sign on with a whaling ship. Unfortunately, there is no passage to Nantucket until Monday so he must find lodging that he can afford. He finally settles on the Spouter-Inn, Peter Coffin proprietor.

The novel opens with one of the most famous first lines in American literature: "Call me Ishmael." The biblical Ishmael (Genesis 16:1-16; 21:10 ff.) is disinherited and dismissed from his home in favor of his half-brother Isaac. The name suggests that the narrator is something of an outcast, a drifter, a fellow of no particular family other than mankind (foreshadowing the very last word of the novel's epilogue). Ishmael confirms his independent ways when he tells us that he never travels the ocean as a passenger because passengers tend to rely on others, becoming seasick or having other problems; worse, they must buy their passage instead of being paid. Nor does he seek any special rank aboard ship, neither captain nor cook, because he abominates "all honorable, respectable toils" and has enough trouble just taking care of himself. Because this novel presents such a strong first-person narrative voice, the reader can expect that this will be Ishmael's story as well as Moby Dick's or Ahab's or anyone else's. We might also remember that the narrator is Ishmael, not Melville.

We soon learn that Ishmael is a narrator who is open to the complexities of life. Others may accept simple explanations; Ishmael does not. Moby-Dick deals with depths and complications of meaning, presented primarily through the narrator. Ishmael is, above all, an observer. He avoids responsibility for others but genuinely cares for his friends. He doesn't mind servile occupations. After all, he says, "Who ain't a slave? Tell me that."

There is an ominous atmosphere in the setting of New Bedford on this frosty, wind-swept December night. The streets are nearly deserted, dreary blocks of blackness, only a solitary light flickering here or there, "like a candle moving about in a tomb." Ishmael is alone. The name of the inn where he finds a kind of shelter is reminiscent of the whaling industry; the proprietor's name foreshadows death. Ishmael is justified in being a bit wary, even afraid.

***Significance(Ch1-2):***

As the novel begins, the narrator, [Ishmael](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Ishmael), introduces himself. He doesn't have much money and is feeling depressed, so he decides to "sail about a little and see the watery part of the world." The sea holds an attraction for him, as it does for many. Yet he will not travel as a passenger. Instead, he will work as a "simple sailor."

In Chapter 2, Ishmael packs his clothes in an old carpet-bag and sets out from Manhattan to New Bedford, where he hopes to catch a boat to Nantucket, a well-known center of the whaling industry. However, he misses the boat he expected and must wait in New Bedford for a few nights. Not having much money, he must seek out an economical inn to stay in while he waits. He finds a run-down place called The Spouter Inn, run by Peter Coffin.

The opening line of this novel is one of the most famous in American literature. The wording of this line leaves some doubt as to whether the narrator is named [Ishmael](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Ishmael) or is simply inviting readers to call him this name—one that calls to mind the biblical Ishmael, Abraham's son by Hagar.

These first chapters reveal Ishmael's problem—he's gloomy, wants a change, and his solution is to go to sea. He eloquently describes the beautiful, "ungraspable phantom" of the sea, saying "[t]here is magic in it." He longs to experience the remote, forbidden places in the world.

These chapters also introduce important themes, including destiny. Ishmael describes the Fates as stage managers and believes that "going on this whaling voyage, formed part of the grand programme of Providence that was drawn up a long time ago." Appropriate to this theme, [Melville](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/author/) introduces the literary technique of foreshadowing, which he will return to often in the course of the novel: The Spouter Inn is run by Peter Coffin. Ishmael considers how ominous that name sounds, but reassures himself that it is a common name. Of course, this name foreshadows the conclusion of the novel.

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

***Summary Part 1:***

[Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) narrates how he wound up on the particular boat, the Pequod, on which the novel focuses. He decided to leave Manhattan and to travel first to New Bedford, Massachusetts, from which he could catch a smaller boat to Nantucket Island, where many whalers begin their journeys. But after arriving in New Bedford on a cold night in December, he found that there were no more small boats to Nantucket, and that he would have to spend the night in town. Because he was poor at the moment, he decided to find the cheapest in that would take him.

***Analysis Part 1:***

Melville often writes of the burgeoning seaport towns of the northeastern coast of the United States. Here, New York, New Bedford, and Nantucket are all regions that deal in shipping and other port activities. New Bedford is also a very successful town—rather than the relatively small town it is today—and New York has yet to fully differentiate itself as the largest and most prosperous city in the country.

***Summary Part 2:***

[Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) walks by a series of inns, attached to bars (or “public houses”) that appear too expensive for his budget. He finds, down by the water, a place called the Spouter Inn, owned (as stated on the sign) by a man named [Peter Coffin](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters). Although Ishmael is worried by the dreary look of the place, and ominous name of its owner, he decides to walk inside regardless. Ishmael pauses in the narration to muse upon the story of Lazarus and the rich man (known as Dives), from the Gospel of Luke. In that story, Lazarus lay outside the rich man’s house for many days, and the rich man gave him no food or money—after both died, however, the rich man found that Lazarus received divine care, and the rich man did not. Ishmael then interrupts his own musing, and states he will describe the dark, sooty Spouter Inn in the next chapter.

***Analysis Part 2:***

Although Ishmael worries a great deal about money in the early chapters of the novel, money will cease to be a primary concern once the novel shifts into its section on the open seas. For the gold doubloon that Ahab so dramatically nails to the main-mast of the ship is worthless on the sea—it cannot be spent on anything—and many of the sailors are not even sure that they will return to land alive at all. But, in the beginning of the novel, one of Ishmael’s primary motivations for shipping out to sea is to make a living for himself, as he barely has any money to his name. Meanwhile, possible foreboding abounds.

***Quotations:***

***Quotation 1:***

D]oubtless, my going on this whaling voyage, formed part of the grand programme of Providence that was drawn up a long time ago. It came in as a sort of brief interlude and solo between more extensive performances. I take it that this part of the bill must have run something like this:  
  
"GRAND CONTESTED ELECTION FOR THE PRESIDENCY OF THE UNITED STATES. "WHALING VOYAGE BY ONE ISHMAEL. "BLOODY BATTLE IN AFFGHANISTAN."  
  
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.  
  
Chief among these motives was the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself. (1.11-12)

***Explanation 1:***

So here’s what Ishmael claims: I went on my voyage on the Pequod because it was fate. And because I was interested in whales. But mostly because it was fate. And because I chose to find out more about whaling. Hmm, contradict yourself much there, Ish?

***Quotation 2:***

It seemed the great Black Parliament sitting in Tophet. A hundred black faces turned round in their rows to peer; and beyond, a black Angel of Doom was beating a book in a pulpit. It was a n\*\*\*\* church; and the preacher’s text was about the blackness of darkness, and the weeping and wailing and teeth-gnashing there. Ha, Ishmael, muttered I, backing out, Wretched entertainment at the sign of "The Trap!" (2.6)

***Explanation 2:***

In this early chapter, Melville briefly gives us what seems like a little throwaway scene: Ishmael mistakes a black church for an inn, goes in, and has to back out in embarrassment when he sees the evening worship service. Even though this moment doesn’t advance the plot at all, it does set up the nineteenth-century racial stereotypes that the novel will deal with (and overturn) in later chapters.