***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.

***Brief Analysis:***

Throughout Moby-Dick we see a constant occurrence of light and dark, white and black, not the least of which contrasts “The Whiteness of the Whale” (to quote a later chapter title) to the darkness of the Pequod’s mood, purpose, and (interestingly) racial makeup.\* Early in the book we see the contrast between Ishmael and Queequeg, and even a contrast within Queequeg himself, which I will without a doubt cover in posts to come. Early in “The Carpet-Bag,” Ishmael arrives in New Bedford, narrowly missing his connecting voyage on to Nantucket. He decides that although New Bedford “has of late been gradually monopolizing the business of whaling,” he’s determined to sail on a Nantucket ship, for “where else but from Nantucket did those aboriginal whalemen, the Red-Men, first sally out in canoes to give chase to the Leviathan?” Ishmael, in other words, is a man of origins — he wants to start from the beginning, to start over. Perhaps the New Bedford Ishmael subsequently describes is beyond salvage.

The sum impression of whiteness throughout Moby-Dick is of terrible blankness — an imperial void, a wealth, a carefree approach to life, a lightness (in terms of weight), an insipid joy, a runaway refinement of humanity. Blackness, on the other hand is a sort of total substance — aforementioned multiracial working class, poverty or hardship, ponderousness, a great weight of duty or necessity, a validating woe of existence, an animal primacy of labor or community or economy. I love “The Carpet-Bag” because it presents all these ideas in terms of “inside” and “outside” — a ready-made pop song if I ever saw one. Ishmael needs to find a place to stay while he waits for the next boat to Nantucket. The first inn is “too expensive and jolly,” and from the second inn “there came such fervent rays, that it seemed to have melted the packed snow and ice from before the house.” As Ishmael walks toward the water in search of cheaper lodgings, he notices “blocks of blackness, not houses, on either hand,” as he penetrates into the working quarters of the town. He stumbles into a black church where “the preacher’s text was about the blackness of darkness.”  And then he finds The Spouter-Inn, whose owner, a man named Peter Coffin, happens to be a native Nantucketer. Ishmael describes the Inn as “quiet,” “palsied,” and “dilapidated,” noting that it stands on a corner receiving a full battering from the winds. Quite a sad little inn.

As if the chapter so far is not awesome enough, Ishmael turns his musings sharply to a metaphor of men as shelters, himself quoting “an old writer — of whose works I possess the only copy extant” (I love this part!):

. . . it maketh a marvellous [sic] difference, whether thou lookest out at it [the cold wind] from a glass window where all the frost is on the outside, or whether thou observest it from that sashless window, where the frost is on both sides, and of which the wight of death is the only glazier.

Ishmael clarifies that the windows are his eyes and the body his house, and a poorly insulated house at that. He laments that bodies cannot keep out the cold without amenities — shelter, fire, clothing. He talks about “Lazarus” (poor) freezing on the doorstep of “Dives” (rich) like an “iceberg . . . moored to one of the Moluccas.” Yet there a twist. As Ishmael wishes “the privilege of making my own summer with my own coals,” he describes Dives as “a Czar in an ice palace made of frozen sighs.”

So as the rich attempt to warm themselves from the outside in, the poor are left to warm themselves from the inside out. Though we are never asked or allowed to think of the latter as a preferable situation — Lazarus would rather be in Hell itself than cold on the street — Dives is left alone to drink “the tepid tears of orphans.” Man can not be sustained by external luxuries, but only by the strength of the soul within. It sort of reminds me of Hegel’s master/slave relationship — the poor workers at least have some control over their situation, being dependent on no one but themselves — but that doesn’t quite sum it up; in fact, it almost seems naive in this context. After all, Lazarus is freezing regardless of his strength of spirit. However, we are definitely left with a coldness in the blankness of whiteness (echoed in the snow itself) — a failed attempt to compensate isolation (void) with material things. I think we are also left with a warmth of pride in labor over leisure. There is another kind of “inside” for the outsiders — a warmth of community and spirit in mutual plight — and so Ishmael comes in from the cold, finding his place among the indefatigable outcasts.

***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.

***Quotation 3:***

# “WHERE THAT TEMPESTUOUS WIND EUROCLYDON KEPT UP A WORSE HOWLING THAN IT EVER DID ABOUT POOR PAUL’S TOSSED CRAFT”

***Explanation 3:***

Modernly known as Levanter or Gregale, Euroclydon, as defined by Paul Coones in Euroclydon: A Tempestuous Wind, is “the foundation of Mediterranean navigation, a conceptual system analogous to the Micronesian etak, though perhaps less sophisticated, in which an illiterate and astronomically naïve sailing community evolves a practical system of directional rules of thumb.” It is a mighty wind that blows northeast to southeast anywhere from ten to fifteen consecutive days. Usually a “damp, misty atmosphere” accompanies the wind, rendering navigating around islands dangerous, according to S. T. Gillet in The Euroclydon. Euroclydon is anything but a myth to sailors; the wind can destroy ships by hurling them onto the shore of islands. As much as it is a danger, however, it is also an essential aid in navigation. Its consistent NE to SE trajectory allows sailors to always have one directional rule of thumb, as Coones describes. Finally, Euroclydon is an old wind; references to it date at least as far back as the Bible, as in Acts 27:14 when the mighty wind wrecks the apostle Paul on the coast of Malta.

Melville’s reference to Euroclydon occurs in Chapter 2 of Moby-Dick, “The Carpet-Bag.” Ishmael is looking for a place to stay the night in New Bedford upon first arriving to town, and he is being rather choosy about it. Some places are too nice, some too dreary.  When he comes across the Spouter-Inn he is entranced by how it is “leaning over sadly,” as if constantly blown by that tempestuous wind, Euroclydon, which is blowing more frightfully on this bitterly cold night than it did when it wrecked Paul on Malta. (If not a Christ-complex, Ishmael certainly has a Christian one.) However, as much as Euroclydon has ravaged the outside of the Spouter-Inn, it has thereby done marvelous things for the inside, which now appears all the more inviting, hospitable, and pleasing to Ishmael when he finally walks through the door. This is essentially the point of that quotation Ishmael cites about Euroclydon (from the pen of “an old writer,” whose works Ishmael claims to possesses the only extant copies). Here, at the Spouter-Inn, Ishmael stays during his time in New Bedford; here he meets Queequeg. Ishmael identifies utterly with the Inn: “these eyes are windows, and this body of mine is the house.” Although his journey begins surrounded and cut through by this violent and bitterly cold wind, which makes even the dead Lazarus shiver, Ishmael appreciates it, creates for himself a beautiful self-image and the beautiful prospect of a life-renewing journey with it. It sets the stage for an epic whaling voyage through the eyes of someone newly reinventing himself and hopeful for the future. Ishmael transforms “that tempestuous wind Euroclydon” into a thing of true beauty rather than a mean destructor; in his eyes it ushers in new opportunity and new experience. Euroclydon provides sailors with a simple rule of thumb for navigation; it is only right, therefore, that it led Ishmael to the Spouter-Inn, which consequently led him to everything that made his voyage what we know it as today.

***Quotation 4:***

# “THAT LAZARUS SHOULD LIE STRANDED THERE ON THE CURBSTONE BEFORE THE DOOR OF DIVES”

***Explanation 2:***

In Chapter 2 of Moby-Dick, Ishmael alludes to the story of “The Rich Man and Lazarus” from the Gospel of Luke as a metaphor for the terrifically cold night in New Bedford, which his first night in the town.

[](http://commons.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Meister_des_Codex_Aureus_Epternacensis_001.jpg)

c. 1035-1040 (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

In the biblical parable, Lazarus, a beggar, is exposed to only the evil and ill wills of life; he lives outside the gates of Dives, starving and full of sores. Dives is a selfish, spoiled man who wears only the finest of linens and feasts heartily everyday without a thought for the poor leper who resides outside his gates. Both Lazarus and Dives die; Lazarus is taken away to heaven, to an eternity of rest and peacefulness, while Dives is struck down to hell. Ishmael identifies Lazarus as stranded in the cold Euroclydon wind outside of the Spouter-Inn in New Bedford. He also speaks of Dives parading around in the cold wind in his fine, warm linens while Lazarus is using the curbside for a pillow and warming himself by the Northern Lights. “Now, that Lazarus should lie stranded there on the curbstone before the door of Dives,” outside the door of the Spouter-Inn, on the one hand, might merely be meant to state hyperbolically how frightfully cold this night is. It is Ishmael’s good fortune to be able to venture inside.

On the other hand, the allusion might be more pointed than that. The reader will soon learn that setting foot in the Spouter-Inn does not bring Ishmael fully in the realm of Dives. The establishment is humble, and that is its charm. The real view of Dives comes in the full light of the following day, when poor Lazarus is nowhere to be seen. Rather the street is full of captains, cannibals, and greenhands, people of every ilk. Ishmael is impressed with the wealth of his new environs:

New Bedford is a queer place. Had it not been for us whalemen, that tract of land would this day perhaps have been in as howling a condition as the coast of Labrador. As it is, parts of her back country are enough to frighten one, they look so bony. The town itself is perhaps the dearest place to live in, in all New England. It is a land of oil, true enough: but not like Canaan; a land, also, of corn and wine. The streets do not run with milk; nor in the spring-time do they pave them with fresh eggs. Yet, in spite of this, nowhere in all America will you find more patrician-like houses; parks and gardens more opulent, than in New Bedford. Whence came they? how planted upon this once scraggy scoria of a country? Go and gaze upon the iron emblematical harpoons round yonder lofty mansion, and your question will be answered. Yes; all these brave houses and flowery gardens came from the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian oceans. One and all, they were harpooned and dragged up hither from the bottom of the sea.

Here is the realm of Dives: a place that would be little more than a “howling” wilderness—barren, exposed, cold—if not for the industry and consequent wealth of whaling. So what befell that poor Lazarus Ishmael saw sleeping in these very streets the night previous that he does not or no longer partakes in the patrician lifestyle of New Bedford? Maybe he fell on hard times; maybe he has a mental and/or physical debilitation that prevents him from working; maybe he had a particularly long lay (the 777th maybe); maybe he no longer cares; maybe he never did. The point is this: the picturesque beauty and opulence of New Bedford, “harpooned and dragged up hither from the bottom of the sea,” does not extend to every one of its citizens. Maybe this explains in part why Ishmael is intent on sailing from Nantucket, when there would be plenty of whaling voyages leaving from New Bedford. Maybe Nantucket has a more communally minded economy; it is an island unto itself, after all. Maybe it just hasn’t seen the division of wealth that has struck the more urban environment of New Bedford; or maybe Ishmael just doesn’t remark it there because of his romantic preoccupations. Where, where there is economy, (is this not the question posed by the Gospel of Luke?) does the rich man not have his Lazarus?