***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 3 –Spouter Inn***

***Summary:***

Inside the Spouter-Inn, Ishmael finds a large, somewhat inscrutable oil painting, which he finally determines to be a depiction of a whale attacking a ship. On the other wall is a collection of “monstrous clubs and spears.” Because the inn is nearly full, Ishmael learns that he will have to share a room with “a dark complexioned” harpooner named Queequeg. He passes the evening in the bar with “a wild set of mariners,” waiting for Queequeg to arrive. Out of apprehension, Ishmael decides that he would rather sleep on a bench than share a bed with some strange, possibly dangerous man. The bench is too uncomfortable, though, and Ishmael decides to put up with the unknown harpooner, who, Coffin had assured him, is perfectly fine because “he pays reg’lar.” Still, Ishmael is worried, since Coffin adds that the harpooner has recently arrived from the South Seas and is currently out peddling shrunken heads. When Queequeg finally returns, the frightened Ishmael watches him from the bed, noting with horror the harpooner’s tattoos and tomahawk pipe. Queequeg sets up and worships a small, dark-colored idol. His prayers over, he discovers Ishmael in his bed. He flourishes the tomahawk pipe as Ishmael shouts for the inn’s owner. After Coffin explains the situation, Ishmael and Queequeg settle in for the night, Ishmael having decided that it is better to share a bed with a “sober cannibal” than a “drunken Christian.”

***Detailed Summary:***

* Ishmael enters the Spouter-Inn, and—symbolism alert!—the first thing he sees is a strange oil painting so old and dirty that it seems abstract.
* Ishmael spends a long time looking at this painting trying to figure out what it depicts. (Think of it as a [**Rorschach Test**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rorschach_inkblot_test) for our intrepid protagonist.)
* He eventually decides that it represents a ship in a storm and a whale leaping up to fling itself on the ship. Hmm, why do you think he came up with that?
* When Ishmael looks around the rest of the inn, he sees, displayed on the walls, "a heathenish array" (3.4) of weapons, mostly harpoons and lances from whaling ships or weapons from distant countries.
* Ishmael goes further into the inn, noticing that the low ceiling, visible beams, and plank floor almost make the inn itself seem like a ship. The doorway between the public room and the bar is decorated with a giant whale’s jawbone.
* Ishmael heads into the bar, where, he notes, the barman is selling drinks using trick glasses that make it look like you’re getting more for your money than you really are.
* There are several different seamen at the bar, and Ishmael finds the landlord and asks for a room.
* Unfortunately, the inn is full, but the landlord offers to let Ishmael share a bed with a harpooner. (Sharing a bed with someone at a crowded inn was actually pretty common in this time.)
* Ishmael hems and haws; he doesn’t really want to share a bed, but he also doesn’t want to go back out into the cold and look for somewhere else. He reluctantly agrees.
* After a short wait, Ishmael and some other patrons of the inn have supper in another room.
* At dinner, Ishmael learns that the harpooner with whom he’s going to share a bed isn’t there yet and is "a dark complexioned chap" (3.14), which makes him a little suspicious. Racism!
* After supper, everyone goes back into the bar, where Ishmael waits for the harpooneer and does some casual people-watching.
* There’s a loud, raucous noise outside. Enter a bunch of men from a ship called the Grampus (which is, incidentally, also an old name for the "orca," or killer whale—like Shamu), which has just come back from a four-year voyage to the Fiji Islands.
* They start doing some hard-core drinking and partying while Ishmael watches.
* Ishmael notices that one of the men is a little mellower than the others.
* This guy (whose name, we learn, is Bulkington), is tall and broad, deeply tanned, and Southern. He slips away in the middle of the party.
* When Bulkington’s shipmates notice, they go after him.
* The inn quiets again. Ishmael has decided that he doesn’t want to share a bed with anyone and that he’s going to sleep on the bench at the bar.
* The landlord takes a carpenter’s plane (a hand tool used to scrape wood until it’s flat) and tries to level out the bench a bit, but it has so many knots that he can’t really do anything with it.
* Ishmael tells him not to bother, and the landlord leaves, grinning.
* Ishmael realizes that the bench is too narrow and too short; he supplements it with a chair and tries to sleep using the wall to support himself, but he’s really cold and uncomfortable.
* Ishmael considers taking the harpooneer’s room and locking him out, but rejects the idea because the guy might wait outside for him and beat him up the next day.
* Finally Ishmael decides that sleeping with the harpooneer might be okay after all.
* He calls the landlord and asks why the harpooneer isn’t back yet—it’s midnight at this point.
* The landlord explains that the harpooneer isn’t back because he’s been out trying to sell his head, but can’t because the market is flooded with them, and the one he has is broken.
* Ishmael gets angry and thinks the landlord is making fun of him by telling some weird nonsense story.
* The landlord tries to calm Ishmael down and explains that the harpooneer had a bunch of embalmed human heads from New Zealand.
* The harpooneer, the landlord explains, has been selling them all over town during the last week, but the last one of the bunch is cracked and he wanted to sell it by today (Saturday).
* After all, it would be pretty bad to sell a shrunken head on the Sabbath, wouldn’t it?
* Ishmael doesn’t really feel any better about his situation after hearing this story (a shrunken head: gulp), but he agrees to follow the landlord upstairs to the harpooneer’s bed.
* The landlord leaves Ishmael alone in the room, and Ishmael snoops around in the harpooneer’s things a little bit—he even tries on a weird poncho made of quills.
* Ishmael slowly undresses and eventually has to get into bed because he’s so cold.
* He sleeps restlessly for a little bit.
* The harpooneer comes back, carrying a lantern in one hand and, yes, an embalmed head in the other.
* Ishmael lies still and quiet, watching the harpooneer get ready for bed.
* He’s startled to see the harpooneer’s face, because the man is not only dark-skinned but tattooed all over.
* When the man takes off his hat, it turns out that he’s bald (or at least has a shaved head).
* He also has a hatchet-like weapon that Ishmael thinks of as a tomahawk.
* Ishmael’s really afraid of the man and considers trying to sneak out. He realizes, however, that he’s mostly afraid because he doesn’t understand the guy, and stays where he is.
* The harpooneer keeps undressing as Ishmael watches.
* Every part of his body is covered in the same checkerboard-pattern tattoos. Ishmael seems to really enjoy watching him undress, even though he’s afraid.
* Next, the harpooneer takes out a wooden statue, puts it above the hearth, and makes an offering of heated biscuit to the statue while singing and chanting.
* Then he puts the statue away without much fuss.
* Ishmael tries to speak, but can’t.
* The man takes his "tomahawk," lights the end of it, and puts it in his mouth; apparently it’s also a pipe. Then he puts out the light and gets into bed, still smoking.
* Ishmael yelps and rolls away from the man.
* The harpooneer notices him and starts demanding who he is.
* Ishmael calls for the landlord.
* The landlord, Peter Coffin, comes and calms them both down.
* He explains to the harpooneer, whose name is Queequeg, that the two men need to share a bed because the inn is full.
* Queequeg is very understanding and offers Ishmael his place in the bed back.
* Ishmael is charmed by Queequeg’s good manners and gets back in bed—on the condition that Queequeg not smoke, because it’s a fire hazard. Fair enough.
* Queequeg agrees and they go to sleep.

***Brief Summary:***

Upon entering the inn, Ishmael is fascinated by a large, obscure oil painting. Eventually he decides that the subject is a ship foundering in a hurricane as a leaping whale is about to impale itself on the craft's three mastheads. After supper, finding no private beds available, Ishmael chooses to sleep on a bench, but that proves to be much too uncomfortable. Upon the urging of Mr. Coffin, the proprietor, Ishmael agrees to share a bed with a harpooner who is out attempting to sell an embalmed human head that the man obtained in the South Seas. Concerned but very weary, Ishmael retires. As he is nodding off, he is startled by the return of Queequeg, the harpooner who seems to Ishmael to be a monstrous cannibal. Queequeg is also surprised to find someone in his bed. Fearing for his life, Ishmael desperately hollers for the landlord's help.

The ominous tone continues as Ishmael enters the inn, which is compared to a condemned old ship. The narrator is quite taken by an obscure painting, a "boggy, soggy, squitchy picture" with such a confusion of shades and shadows that, for some time, Ishmael can make no sense of it. Contributing to the theme of death and foreshadowing later events in the novel, the subject seems to be a foundering ship under attack from a whale. As Ishmael's adventure continues, he will discover obscurity in many subjects, including life itself.

For this night, however, Ishmael seeks few solutions other than a hot meal and a place to sleep. Filled with meat and dumplings and unable to accommodate himself to a private bench, he accepts the landlord's suggestion that Ishmael share a bed with a harpooner.

The introduction of the harpooner Queequeg provides a comic interlude in what has been a gloomy night. Ishmael, however, is not laughing. Nor is Queequeg. Startled to find an apparent interloper in his bed, the heavily tattooed harpooner threatens homicide in a dialect that may seem stereotyped today but originally was intended to evoke humor as it adds to Ishmael's terror: "Who-e debel you? . . . you no speak-e, dam-me, I kill-e." Certain that he is about to be done in by a cannibal, Ishmael shouts for help. Mr. Coffin, enjoying the little trick he has pulled and confident that Queequeg is harmless, rushes in to settle the matter. Ishmael soon concludes that the harpooner is a decent, clean fellow and decides it is better to sleep with a sober cannibal than with a drunken Christian. This is just the beginning of Ishmael's understanding that the pagan Queequeg is a better man than most.

Glossary

**bulwarks**the part of a ship's side above the deck.

**Cape-Horner**a ship that travels around Cape Horn at the southern tip of South America.

**skrimshander**scrimshaw, intricate carving of whalebones.

**tar**here, a sailor.

**obstreperously**noisily, boisterously.

**spliced**here, joined in marriage.

***Critical Analysis:***

The Spouter Inn reminds Ishmael of the bulwarks of some condemned old craft. There is a long, limber portentous, black mass of something hovering in the center of a picture of a painting there; it bears a faint resemblance to a gigantic fish, but in fact represents a Cape-Horner in a great hurricane. On the opposite wall is an array of monstrous clubs and spears. The innkeeper tells Ishmael that he must sleep two in a bed, which he dislikes and will do so only if the innkeeper has no other place for him. The innkeeper tells Ishmael about the ship harpooner, a "dark-complexioned" man with whom Ishmael will share a bed. Ishmael suggests that he will sleep on a bench instead, but it is too uncomfortable and he must sleep in a bed. Ishmael goes into the harpooner's room, where there are fishhooks and harpoons. The harpooner, who is from New Zealand, appears dangerous. The harpooner, [Queequeg](https://www.gradesaver.com/moby-dick/study-guide/character-list" \l "queequeg), undresses to show his tattooed chest and arms, and has a tomahawk with him. Ishmael gets in bed with him only after the landlord makes him stash his tomahawk away. Ishmael never slept better in his life.

Even long before Ishmael begins his whaling voyage, Melville creates a portentous atmosphere that foreshadows great tragedy and hardship. Even the name of the innkeeper, [Peter Coffin](https://www.gradesaver.com/moby-dick/study-guide/character-list#peter-coffin), is a reminder of death. The painting in the Spouter Inn emphasizes the possible dangers of the sea, while the décor of the Spouter is intensely violent imagery that suggests pain and hardship. The painting in the Spouter Inn is of particular significance; it shows a picture that could either be a ship or a gigantic fish, thus blurring the lines between the two different entities. This suggests that the difference between the whaling ship and the titular character of the novel, the great whale, are in some sense one and the same.

The character Queequeg lends himself to several different symbolic interpretations. As an aborigine from New Zealand, Queequeg represents the uncivilized and the foreign. His particular heritage is relatively unimportant to the novel; it is more important to note that he represents the 'other,' a person from a different heritage from the conventional American society which Ishmael may in some sense represent. Yet despite Queequeg's background, he proves himself to be more 'civilized' and refined than originally suggested; his reputation as a savage stems primarily from the tales of the innkeeper and not from any direct behavior.

***Critical Study:***

At many points in Moby-Dick we see an object (or event) as text experienced by many different “readers” in very different ways. The object in itself becomes meaningless while the process of interpretation becomes laden with meaning. As the subject struggles to unlock the meaning of an obscured otherness, he creates the only meaning that truly exists — his experience. In “The Spouter-Inn,” Ishmael happens upon a large mural in his New Bedford Inn. Obscured by dirt, grime, and shadow, Ishmael grapples to “arrive at an understanding of its purpose.” The painting appears to him as “chaos bewitched.”

Ishmael is almost mesmerized by “that one portentous something in the picture’s midst. That once found out, and all the rest were plain.” After much negotiation of vantage, lighting, and context the three vertical shapes appear to Ishmael as the broken masts of a hurricane-tossed whaling vessel, and that “portentous something” becomes a whale, launching itself from the sea and “impaling himself on the three mast-heads.”

Melville repeatedly throws us as readers into maddening situations that beg to be assigned a meaning while simultaneously reminding us they are meaningless. The awesome thing is, the situations are not paradoxical but coexistent. To Melville, I think, these situations are meaningless without a subject. Like people, they beg to be beheld because only that process makes them meaningful.

Most of the rest of the chapter involves Ishmael’s long wait for Queequeg, his as yet unmet bedfellow. Queequeg’s obscured form takes on much the same role as the obscured painting. Ishmael, again through many negotiations of vantage and context, changes his experience of Queequeg many times before having even met him. Finding significance in insignificant facts — Queequeg’s keeping of late hours, Queequeg as a “‘dark complexioned’ harpooneer,” Queequeg as a seller of shrunken heads — Ishmael constructs a meaning wholly independent of any act or intent on Queequeg’s part, which is fair to say since Queequeg does not yet know Ishmael exists, let alone that Ishmael is scrutinizing him.

All this talk of other, subject, and object brought me back to high school and college in a big way, and so this song came out a little Smiths-ish, I think. Let it take you back, and tip a glass tonight to the subject beholding you from across the table.

Significance:

“Entering that gable-ended Spouter-Inn…”—on one wall there’s an old, disheveled painting that’s hard to make out, but Ishmael decides it represents a half-foundered ship in a hurricane and an “exasperated whale, purposing to spring clean over the craft, […] in the enormous act of impaling himself on the three mast-heads”—the other wall of the Spouter-Inn is full of giant, old whaling implements—the den area is dim and has shelves of dusty trinkets from past voyages—there’s a bar set inside of a whale’s jaw bone with a bartender named Jonah—Here Ishmael spies “[a number of young seamen gathered about a table, examining by a dim light divers specimen of *skrimshander*](https://chasingflukes.com/reading_guide/glossary/3skrimshander/)“—Coffin informs Ishmael that he’ll have to share a bed with a harpooneer, a “dark complexioned chap” who only likes rare steaks (spoiler alert: he’s a cannibal) —a crew just returned from a voyage arrives at the inn and proceeds to drink, except for one aloof sailor named Bulkington who soon leaves—Ishmael tries to sleep on a knotty, narrow old bench but decides to learn more about his possible bunkmate—Coffin says he’s out “selling his head” (later revealed to be a broken, shrunken head)—Ishmael goes into the room and snoops around his new roommate’s things before settling into bed—Ishmael is restless—the heavily tattooed (face and all) harpooneer named Queequeg shows up and worships a small idol he carries—looks to Ishmael like a “three days’ old Congo baby”—Ishmael says something and is threatened by the startled Queequeg’s tomahawk-pipe—Coffin steps in and they simmer down—more proper introductions are made—Ishmael has the best sleep of his life.

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

***Summary Part 1:***

Near the [Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) describes the entrance to the Spouter Inn, near which hangs a painting of a dark sea-scene, in many dark hues. Ishmael puzzles over the subject of the scene, and eventually concludes that the picture shows a “half-foundered” (or sinking) ship with three masts—although it could also portray a leviathan, or whale, in the murky water. The inn’s bar also contains a great many old harpoons and spears, for catching whales, and the bar itself is shaped like a whale’s jaw. The locals call the bartender there Jonah, because he appears to live in the whale’s mouth.

***Analysis Part 1:***

One of the novel’s first of many intimations that dangers await the Pequod at sea. In particular, Ishmael seems fixated on the idea that a leviathan, or whale, would be capable of capsizing an entire ship simply by ramming into it. Of course, the Pequod will be destroyed by Moby Dick in exactly this way, making the painting an accurate foreshadowing of the novel’s events. And yet, the painting is also inscrutable, and therefore what it shows is very open to interpretation, and so the way that the painting plays into the fate of the Pequod is not clear.

***Summary Part 2:***

After eating supper nearby, Ishmael finds the landlord, [Peter Coffin](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters), and asks if he has a bed available for the night. Jonah replies that there isn’t much space, but that Ishmael can share a room, and bed, with a mysterious harpooneer. At first Ishmael agrees, although he is less than enthusiastic about sharing a bed (the innkeeper thinks sharing a cot is normal for sailors, but Ishmael remarks to himself that, in fact, even in cramped sailing conditions, sailors usually have their own bunks). But as the evening wears on, and the crew of the Grampus, another whaling ship, enters the bar and begins drinking heavily, Ishmael wonders when the harpooneer will arrive, and what kind of person he will be. Ishmael also hears many of the sailors speak in hushed, reverential tones about Bulkington, a fellow-sailor on the Grampus.

***Analysis Part 2:***

Another of the novel’s features is its reference to other whaling vessels. Like men in general, there appears in the novel to be great variation between the disposition of the various whalers with whom Ishmael comes in contact. There are whalers like those on the Grampus, who return from the sea ready to drink and carouse, perhaps because the whale-hunt has been successful. And there are those like the crew of the Rachel, encountered at the end of the novel, who have suffered horrible misfortunes on the high seas. That sailors all have individual bunks attests to the "dignity" of sea-life, and the sense of each sailor as an individual within a larger society, making it a metaphor for society or political state.

Summary Part 3:

The innkeeper teases [Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) when Ishmael expresses anxiety about sharing his bed with the harpooneer. The innkeeper tells him that the harpooneer is out that night “selling his head,” and intimates that the harpooneer has dark skin and is from a “far-off” place. Ishmael wonders what it might mean for the man to be “selling heads,” and the innkeeper finally reveals that the harpooneer is from the area around New Zealand, and he sells dried, shriveled heads as a kind of “curio” from that region. The innkeeper shows Ishmael into the bedroom where the [harpooneer](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/queequeg) is staying, and Ishmael marvels at the strangeness of the harpooneer’s clothing, lying folded in the room—Ishmael believes it resembles a doormat.

Analysis Part 3:

The first reference to Queequeg, who will become Ishmael’s “bosom friend” and closest confidant aboard the Pequod. Coffin, the innkeeper, appears to do his best to convince Ishmael that Queequeg is dangerous. This is in keeping with widespread fear, among whaling communities, of the “heathens” from faraway places who often served as harpooneers. Yet exactly these “foreign” men were chosen to work the harpoons because the jobs were often considered “too dangerous” for white men to perform.

Summary Part 4:

[Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) takes off his clothes and crawls into the small bed, then tries to go to sleep. After a short time, however, Ishmael notices a man coming into the darkened room—the [harpooneer](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/queequeg). Ishmael notices, with horror and fear, that the man is from a “foreign land,” that he carries a tomahawk and a large head, in which he seems to keep his dried heads, and that he has tattoos in dark purple ink, all over his face, neck, arms, and back. Ishmael considers jumping out the window of the room, but they are on the second floor, he does not want to behave “like a coward,” and he worries that he will not be able to escape successfully without hurting himself.

Analysis Part 4:

An instance of Ishmael doing his best to convince himself of his own personal and psychological strength. At later instances in the novel, too, as when Ishmael falls out of a capsizing whaling-boat, Ishmael must remind himself that whaling is a dangerous business, and that he has signed up for exactly this. There are other sailors aboard the Pequod, however, who appear to relish the dangers they encounter—these include men like Stubb, the second mate.

Summary Part 5:

The [harpooneer](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/queequeg) begins a religious ceremony wherein he prays to a small black wooden idol, which [Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) calls a “manikin.” After this prayer ceremony, the harpooneer turns around and, seeing Ishmael in the bed, assumes Ishmael is dangerous, and brandishes his tomahawk. Ishmael, terrified, calls for [Peter Coffin](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters). Coffin arrives in the room and tells Ishmael and the harpooneer, named [Queequeg](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/queequeg), that the two are to share a room together. Ishmael criticizes Coffin for not saying, earlier, that Queequeg is a “cannibal” (by which Ishmael means a native of the Pacific islands in which the practice of cannibalism sometimes occurs). Coffin, laughing, replies that Queequeg is a peaceful man, despite his cannibalism, and that he will happily share the room with Ishmael.

Analysis Part 5:

As it turns out, Coffin has been playing a joke on Ishmael. Queequeg's peacefulness is part of the image of tolerance depicted in the book, of men of all different stripes necessarily coming together in the working of the ship and pursuit of fortune. Queequeg’s religious idol, revealed to be named “Yojo,” plays little role in the novel, other than to comfort Queequeg, and to convince him that Ishmael will be the one to select the whaling ship on which they set out. Ishmael then selects the Pequod, setting in motion the events of the novel. Queequeg therefore seems content to entrust his fate to the whims, as he interprets them, of this small wooden idol, or “manikin.”

Summary Part 6:

This convinces [Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael), who remarks to himself that it is “better to sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian.” Ishmael tells [Coffin](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters) to tell [Queequeg](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/queequeg), who speaks in in a kind of broken English Ishmael doesn’t entirely understand, to put away his tomahawk (which is also his pipe), since smoking in the bedroom would be dangerous to both men. Ishmael and Queequeg go to sleep, and Ishmael remarks that “he never slept better in his life.”

Analysis Part 6:

A famous line in the novel—Ishmael here realizes that social distinctions between “heathen” and Christian are probably less important than the human distinctions between good and dishonest men. Ishmael will encounter similar instances that will test his prejudices, or preconceptions about men unlike him, while aboard the ship.

***Quotations:***

***Quotation 1:***

I stood looking at him a moment. For all his tattooings he was on the whole a clean, comely looking cannibal. What’s all this fuss I have been making about, thought I to myself – the man’s a human being just as I am: he has just as much reason to fear me, as I have to be afraid of him. Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian. (3.69)

***Explanation 1:***

It’s interesting to think about what makes Ishmael change his mind about Queequeg at this moment. We’d like to be able to say that he realizes you can’t judge a man by his race and that common humanity is more important than racial difference. But it seems equally likely that Ishmael, ahem, liked the look of Queequeg as he got undressed and fancied a cuddle. Or that he just got tired of worrying about it and wanted to go to bed.

***Quotation 2:***

This accomplished, however, he turned round – when, good heavens! what a sight! Such a face! It was of a dark, purplish, yellow colour, here and there stuck over with large blackish looking squares. Yes, it’s just as I thought, he's a terrible bedfellow; he's been in a fight, got dreadfully cut, and here he is, just from the surgeon. But at that moment he chanced to turn his face so towards the light, that I plainly saw they could not be sticking-plasters at all, those black squares on his cheeks. They were stains of some sort or other. At first I knew not what to make of this; but soon an inkling of the truth occurred to me. I remembered a story of a white man – a whaleman too – who, falling among the cannibals, had been tattooed by them. I concluded that this harpooneer, in the course of his distant voyages, must have met with a similar adventure. And what is it, thought I, after all! It’s only his outside; a man can be honest in any sort of skin. But then, what to make of his unearthly complexion, that part of it, I mean, lying round about, and completely independent of the squares of tattooing. To be sure, it might be nothing but a good coat of tropical tanning; but I never heard of a hot sun’s tanning a white man into a purplish yellow one. However, I had never been in the South Seas; and perhaps the sun there produced these extraordinary effects upon the skin. (3.54)

***Explanation 2:***

Ishmael’s ignorance about racial difference, and his lack of knowledge about other cultures, mean not only that he’s horrified by the sight of skin unlike his own, but that he can hardly believe the man he’s seeing isn’t a white man who had a terrible accident. He shows both signs of being ready to think differently about race – "a man can be honest in any sort of skin" – and signs that he’s still prejudiced – such as describing Queequeg’s appearance as "unearthly."

***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:***

# **“UPON ENTERING THE PLACE I FOUND A NUMBER OF YOUNG SEAMEN GATHERED ABOUT A TABLE, EXAMINING BY A DIM LIGHT DIVERS SPECIMEN OF SKRIMSHANDER.”**

***Explanation 2:***

Skrimshaw, as it is spelled in Moby-Dick, or scrimshaw, as it is more widely known today, is “a general name […] for the handicrafts practiced by sailors by way of pastime during long whaling and other voyages, and for the products of these, as small manufactured articles, carvings on bone, ivory, or shells, and the like” (OED). A scrimshander, therefore, would be most commonly understood as one who practices the craft of scrimshaw. As suggested by Peter Coffin’s use of the word as a moniker to hail Ishmael (whose name he has likely forgotten as soon as heard)—“‘But wait a bit, Skrimshander; I’ve got a carpenter’s plane there in the bar’”—it would be a safe bet that a whaleman (even an aspiring one) in Melville’s day would be acquainted with the craft. Many whalemen, often employing scrap pieces of whalebone as the most readily available medium, would while away the more quiet hours at sea with scrimming (the artful whittling and carving of the bone into designs and objects). Often the products of their labor were intended as gifts for loved ones ashore: namely wives, fiancées, sisters, and mothers.

The bulk of scrimshaw specimens that survive today are domestic items, such as this magnificent collection of pie-wheels and pie-multi-tools housed at the New Bedford whaling museum: see Specimen A (pictured below).

[](https://chasingflukes.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/scrimshawpiecrimpers.jpg)

Specimen A:  
Scrimshaw pie-crimping multi-tools from the collection of the New Bedford Whaling Museum; photograph by Nicola Twilley

One of the oldest specimens of scrimshaw housed in the maritime collections at the Smithsonian is a chopper or mincer carved from the jawbone of a sperm whale, a donation by a former Secretary of the Institution, Spencer F. Baird (1823–1887): see Specimen B (pictured below)

[](https://chasingflukes.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/scrimshawwhalebonechopper.jpg)

Specimen B:  
Simply carved and without any engraving, this food chopper, or mincer, was made in two pieces from a sperm whale’s jawbone. Its blunted, curved blade was used to chop soft foods such as bread dough, fruits, sausage, and animal fats.  
Photo and caption credit: Smithsonian National Museum of American History

Other examples of scrimshaw seem more personally addressed, such as this artfully engraved whalebone busk (corset stiffener): See Specimens C and D (pictured below).

[](https://chasingflukes.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/scrimshawbusk.jpg)

Specimen C:  
One of the most intimate pieces of scrimshaw a whaleman could produce was a bone or baleen busk, or corset stiffener. These were carved and given to a crewman’s loved one, who then inserted it into a matching sleeve on her corset as a unique memento of her beloved’s feelings.  
Photo and caption credit: Smithsonian National Museum of American History

[](https://chasingflukes.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/scrimshawdedicationpoem.jpg)

Specimen D:  
A plaintive love poem carved on the back face of a scrimshaw corset busk.  
Photo and caption credit: Smithsonian National Museum of American History

Scrimshaw and scrimshanders are mentioned not infrequently in Moby-Dick, and when they are, it is significant. The first mention occurs near the start of Chapter 3, when Ishmael reports, upon entering the Spouter-Inn, seeing “a number of young seamen gathered about a table, examining by a dim light divers specimens of skrimshander.” That he specifies there were “divers specimens” upon the table might incline us not to imagine them examining exclusively pie-wheels and corset busks. In fact, Ishmael notes the decline of whalebone corset busks in Chapter 75, “The Right Whale’s Head—Contrasted View,” while also supplying an example of the use of whalebone for an implement always in fashion:

As every one knows, these same “hogs’ bristles,” “fins,” “whiskers,” “blinds,” or whatever you please, furnish to the ladies their busks and other stiffening contrivances. But in this particular, the demand has long been on the decline. It was in Queen Anne’s time that the bone was in its glory, the farthingale being then all the fashion. And as those ancient dames moved about gaily, though in the jaws of the whale, as you may say; even so, in a shower, with the like thoughtlessness, do we nowadays fly under the same jaws for protection; the umbrella being a tent spread over the same bone.

In the previous chapter, on “The Sperm Whale’s Head—Contrasted View,” Ishmael describes the methodical removal of the sperm whale’s jawbone, which furnished the raw material for diverse specimens of scrimshaw:

In most cases this lower jaw—being easily unhinged by a practised artist—is disengaged and hoisted on deck for the purpose of extracting the ivory teeth, and furnishing a supply of that hard white whalebone with which the fishermen fashion all sorts of curious articles including canes, umbrellasticks, and handles to riding-whips.

Many sperm whale teeth were adorned by whalemen with engravings of ships and other maritime scenes. It is significant that in the first mention of the art of scrimshaw in *Moby-Dick* we learn that upon coming into port one of the means by which whalemen acquainted their fellows with their diverse haps at sea was to display their scrimshaw. Scrimming was not just an innocuous means of passing time or an economical means of devising gifts for loved ones ashore. It was and remains an artful mode of communication; of social communion across boundaries of status, wealth, gender, nationality, culture, and language; of historical communion across generations and centuries.

[](https://chasingflukes.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/scrimshaw1.jpg)

The first tooth is engraved from top to bottom with the following: No. 8/ N. West Coast/July 29″ 1833/Lat. 37 10. N./Log.125. W./Took 6 Whales. Below is an engraved ship portrait with figures and the words: Sept 20 1833 Anchored/in St Barbara/Sept 29 Sail’d for/Todos Santos Bay. The reverse is signed “JOSIAH SHEFIELD JR.” within an oval border with decorative center. H. 6-1/4 in., W. 3 in.  
The second tooth is engraved from the tip to the bottom: No 9/Oct 3 1833 Anchored in/Todos Santos/”9″ Sail’d for/Turtle Bay/Nov 7″ Off C. St. Lus./Lat. 22.42 N. Lon 110.08 W./Took 2 whales/— \* —/110 bbls/. The engraving features two crossed American flags with arrow tip poles on plinth and the words: Oct 14 Anchored in Turtle Bay./& cooper’d 1000 bbls,/31 sail’d for Cape St. Lucas. The obverse has an engraving of a standing woman within a rectangular border. H. 6-1/8 in., W. 3 in.  
Photo and caption credit: Nancy N. Johnston, “Scrimshaw,” Antiques and Fine Art Magazine (2006)

This last specimen deserves careful scrutiny. It is a rare specimen whereupon the scrimshander—who is known: he is Nantucket-born whaleman Josiah Shefield Jr. (American 1807-1880)—marked out the events of a whaling voyage aboard the Timoleon. In Shefield’s scrimshaw we see an art deeply resonate with that of Melville in Moby-Dick, wherein attention is ever-trained on the ways in which the gruff, lowly, and rude impression of the whaleman can be supplemented or even entirely eclipsed by evidence of his inherent nobility, grandeur, and artistry. No doubt Melville saw as much artistry in the unhinging of a whale’s jawbone and in the way a harpooneer coiled a rope in a line-tub, as much philosophical and poetical import in the workings of the “monkey rope,” as he would in any specimen of scrimshaw. But he would also undoubtedly empathize with a whaleman who chose to represent in his scrimming not picturesque townscapes or versified love notes to his lady waiting ashore but the then perhaps inconsequential details of a particular voyage that would prove to later generations of immeasurable historic and artistic value.