***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 12 –Biographical:***

***Summary:***

* Ishmael gives the reader Queequeg’s back-story:
* Queequeg is from a (fictional) South Sea island called Kokovoko, from a noble family: his father was a king, and his uncle, a high priest.
* As a child, Queequeg always wanted to travel and to see more of the white Christian men than he could observe on a passing whaling or trading ship now and then.
* Queequeg tried to become a sailor on a whaling ship from Sag Harbor, but it didn’t need any more men and he was refused.
* He paddled after the ship in his canoe, sank the canoe, climbed up the side of the ship, grabbed a ringbolt on the deck and refused to let go.
* Eventually, the captain of the ship agreed to let Queequeg stay and made him an ordinary sailor on the ship.
* Queequeg hoped that he would learn things to improve the lives of his people, but instead he discovered that "even Christians could be both miserable and wicked" (12.4).
* He gave up on trying to become like the Christians and resolved to remain a pagan, although he kept living among the white men.
* Hearing this narrative, Ishmael asks Queequeg if he wants to return home and become king, since his father is probably dead by now. (Tactful, Ishmael.)
* Queequeg says that his experiences among the Christians have perhaps made him unfit to be a pagan king, but he might go back eventually when he thinks the time is right and he’s ready.
* In the meantime, he’ll be a harpooneer and sail on whaleboats.
* Ishmael and Queequeg decide to find a whaling ship sailing from Nantucket on which they can both get jobs together.

***Brief Analysis:***

Queequeg is a native of a South Pacific island called Kokovoko, which is “not down on any map; true places never are.” The king’s son, he desired to leave the island to see the world and, he claims, to learn about Christianity. When a whaling ship stopped at Kokovoko, he sought passage but was denied a job. He stowed away on the departing ship and, through sheer persistence, was finally taken on as a whaler. He has since become a skilled harpooner. Although his father is probably dead by now, meaning that Queequeg would be king, he can never go back, because his interaction with Christianity has made him unfit to ascend his homeland’s “pure and undefiled throne.” For Queequeg, Ishmael notes, “that barbed iron [Queequeg’s harpoon] was in lieu of a scepter now.” The two plan to go to Nantucket to find a berth aboard a whaler.

***Analysis:***

Ishmael returns to The Spouter Inn where he finds Queequeg alone. Queequeg seems to be counting the pages of a book. As Queequeg counts, Ishmael studies Queequeg and finds he thinks the man reminds him of George Washington. It is at this point he decides to make friends with the pagan. Ishmael approaches Queequeg and attempts to teach him about the book and the pictures found inside. Soon the two engage in a sort of conversation about the things they had seen in town that day. The two share a smoke from Queequeg's tomahawk pipe and then Queequeg presses his forehead against Ishmael's. Queequeg then hugs Ishmael around the waist and declares the two are bosom friends. In Queequeg's culture, this friendship means the savage would die for Ishmael if needed. After supper, Queequeg gives Ishmael an embalmed head as a gift, and then splits all of the money he owns with him. Although tentative, Ishmael, who is a Presbyterian, even offers sacrifices to Queequeg's idol and joins in his religious ritual. The two again share a bed that night.

After talking and napping intermittently for several hours, Ishmael and Queequeg find themselves unable to sleep. They sit up in bed, smoking and talking intermittedly. Queequeg begins to talk about his homeland and though Ishmael can still not completely understand his speech, begs him to continue.

As Queequeg tells Ishmael about himself, Ishmael soon learns there is more to Queequeg than meets the eye. Queequeg is actually a descendant of royalty, the son of the High Chief or king of the island of Kokovoko. Queequeg came to America because he wanted to visit a Christian country and see if he could take these Christian ideas to his people and help them be happier. Although he wanted to sail to America on a Sag Harbor ship, the ship was full and despite his father's influence, the captain would not let him aboard. Therefore, Queequeg set out in his canoe to a secluded place and waited for the ship to pass by. Once it was near him, he climbed up the chains on the side of the boat and vowed not to let go of a ringbolt on the deck until he was allowed a place on the ship. After some time, the captain allowed him to stay aboard, and he became a whaleman on the ship.

Queequeg admits to Ishmael that he is unhappy among the Christians, seeing they are no more content than any other people are. Ishmael asks why he does not return to his own tribe and take over his royal duties. Queequeg responds that the time he has spent with the Christians has made him unworthy of this honor. Queequeg tells Ishmael of his desire to go to sea again as a whaleman. Ishmael reveals that he too is planning to go to sea on a whaling mission. Queequeg vows to be put on the same ship and shift that Ishmael serves. After another embrace, the two finally sleep.

In this chapter, Melville strengthens the bond between Ishmael and Queequeg, showing that although the two come from different cultures and share different values, they can still be friends. Although the chapter is entitled A Bosom Friend, the friendship is actually compared to a marriage in two places in the chapter. These occur when Queequeg first rubs foreheads with Ishmael and then again when the two are chatting in bed. Melville uses these references not to suggest the two are homosexual, but to give the reader an idea of the closeness that is felt between them.

Up until this point, what has been known about Queequeg has come through Ishmael's viewpoint. In this section, Queequeg talks about himself and how he came to be in the Nantucket area. It is interesting to learn that the man Ishmael has referred to as a savage is indeed the son of the king of his people. Queequeg came to America hoping to take Christian beliefs back to his people and make them happier. However, Queequeg says he finds Christians are no happier than pagans. Also of importance is Queequeg's reference to the fact he has been stained or tainted by the Christians and is no longer worthy of holding a place of honor in his community.

***Synopsis:***

Queequeg, it is revealed, is a native of Kokovoko—island in the South Pacific presumably, but it’s not down on any map (“true places never are”)—his father = high chief; his uncle = high priest; his aunts = wives of great warriors—Queequeg is royalty in his homeland—bravely and hilariously argued for passage on a Sag Harbor whaleship that came by Kokovoko—wanted to see more of the world than his native land—learns the ways of a whaleman—”[like Czar Peter content to toil in the shipyards of foreign cities Quuequeg disdained no seeming ignominy](https://chasingflukes.com/reading_guide/glossary/12czar-peter/)“—initially excited to learn about Christendom, cherishing the hope to thereby better lead his people one day, he was let down by seeing what the sailors did with their wages when they disembarked in Sag Harbor, then in Nantucket (presumably drinking and whoring)—doesn’t feel pure enough to return home and assume his pagan throne after being with Christians for so long—plans to return one day—Queequeg, like Ishmael, just wants to go to sea again—for the time being, he’s a whaleman—the men agree to ship together—Ishmael thinks he can learn from Queequeg, since he knows nothing about whaling.

***Detailed Summary (10-12):***

When Ishmael returns to his room after chapel, he finds Queequeg already there, carving on the nose of his small black idol, Yojo. After some friendly conversation, they bond by sharing a pipe of Queequeg's tobacco. Ishmael even joins the pagan in a burnt offering to Yojo. The narrator justifies his behavior by an allusion to the Golden Rule, which urges us to do unto others as we would want them to do unto us (Matthew 7:12). Queequeg shares his personal history, and the two roommates resolve to be shipmates.

The development of Ishmael's character continues as he opens his mind to Queequeg's character and background. Although the harpooner is a heathen, by Christian definition, Ishmael increasingly notices the man's independent dignity, good heart, and generous spirit. Despite outward appearances, Ishmael concludes, "You cannot hide the soul."

The harpooner is a native of Kokovoko (called Rokovoko in some chapters and editions), an island in the South Pacific where his father was king and his uncle a high priest. Ishmael has sensed his friend's noble spirit, with or without the pedigree. In fact, almost immediately Ishmael recognizes Queequeg's noble character, noting that he "treated me with so much civility and consideration, while I was guilty of great rudeness." Queequeg is a synthesis of all racial and ethnic characteristics; that is, he is a symbol of all mankind. His signature is the symbol for infinity.

The two men seal their bond by sharing a smoke from the harpooner's tomahawk pipe as well as a brief religious service honoring Queequeg's idol. After all, Queequeg has just attended a Christian service, which Ishmael appreciates; it seems only right to Ishmael to reciprocate. Opening his mind to religion is an important step for Ishmael, one which Queequeg took by leaving his home to sail the world and learn of Christians. The narrator mentions that both men are discovering that evil exists among Christians at least as much as among pagans. While this knowledge is somewhat disillusioning, it also expands their outlook and leads to a kind of wisdom that narrower minds miss.

Glossary

magnanimous noble in mind, generous in overlooking insult or injury.

confabulation talking together in an informal way, chatting.

ignominy loss of one's reputation; dishonor, infamy.

for the nonce for now, for the time being.

sceptre rod or staff held by rulers on ceremonial occasions.

hap chance occurrence or event, especially an unfortunate one.

***Significance:***

Queequeg is a native of Kokovoko, an island far away to the West and South. His father was a High Chief, a King, and his uncle a High Priest. A [Sag Harbor](https://www.gradesaver.com/sag-harbor) ship visited Queequeg's father's bay, and there he sought passage to Christian lands. The captain threatened to throw Queequeg overboard, and suspended a cutlass over his naked wrists, but Queequeg did not relent. He was put among the sailors, but did not mind. He was motivated by a profound desire to learn among the Christians. Ishmael wonders why Queequeg did not propose going home and having a coronation, but he is fearful that Christians had unfitted him for ascending the undefiled throne of thirty pagan kings before him. A harpoon had taken the place of a scepter for Queequeg. Queequeg intends to go to sea again in his old vocation. They resolve to go to Nantucket together.

Melville explores the distinction between savage and civilized through the biographical details concerning Queequeg, whose history suggests greater culture and civility than the Europeans with whom he comes in contact. While the sailors believe Queequeg to be a savage, he instead proves to be a literal nobleman whose behavior is highly honorable in contrast to their brutality. The irony of Queequeg's tale is that, having traveled to America and lived among the supposedly civilized, he has in fact become defiled and unfit for his royal position; this calls into questions definitions of savagery and civilization, for Queequeg presumably becomes a savage to his people as he adopts more European customs.

***Critical Study:***

[Ishmael](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Ishmael) returns to the Spouter Inn, where [Queequeg](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/" \l "Queequeg) is sitting by the fire. Ishmael decides to try to make friends with him, and they chat and smoke together. Back in their shared room, Queequeg shares his money with Ishmael and invites him to worship a small idol with him. As a Christian, Ishmael has misgivings about this, but he decides God will not be angry if he joins in. Afterward the two men talk in bed like good friends. Around midnight in Chapter 11, Ishmael and Queequeg are still cozy in the bed. They have been talking and napping on and off, and now they smoke together as Queequeg tells Ishmael about his native land.

In Chapter 12, Ishmael relates Queequeg's story: Queequeg's native island is called Kokovoko. He wanted to see the world, so he canoed to a place where he knew a ship would pass, and when it did he climbed aboard. The captain of the ship tried to throw him off, but this proved difficult and the captain relented, allowing Queequeg to stay aboard and learn how to be a harpooner. Ishmael listens to this story, then asks him what his plans are now. Queequeg says he plans to go back to sea as a harpooner, and Ishmael reveals that he is also planning to go to sea. They decide to go together.

With a head full of Father Mapple's rather emotional sermon, [Ishmael](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Ishmael) comes back to the Spouter Inn to find his heathen acquaintance calmly whittling. As he watches [Queequeg](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/" \l "Queequeg) and considers his good qualities, he says, "I felt a melting in me. No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it." It is interesting that he uses a term Christians use to talk about Christ—redeemed—to describe his reaction to Queequeg. He thus decides to "try a pagan friend ... since Christian kindness has proved but hollow courtesy." Later he participates in Queequeg's worship of his little idol. All of these events suggest that Ishmael has a slightly different perspective on spiritual matters than Father Mapple, and they also show the growing friendship between Queequeg and Ishmael.

The two then stay up talking all night like kids at a slumber party. Queequeg's story reveals one of the reasons Ishmael may find him a "bosom friend": he is, like the biblical Ishmael, a sort of exile, not able to go back to his family. And like [Melville](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/author/)'s Ishmael, who is somewhat disillusioned with "Christian kindness," Queequeg has found that both Christians and pagans can be miserable, cruel people. Two young men, alone in the world, each find in the other a kindred spirit, and so they decide to go to sea together.

***Critical Analysis:***

"Queequeg was a native of Rokovoko, an island far away to the West and South. It is not down in any map; true places never are." Ishmael is accurate here, Rokovoko is a fictional island. In British editions, the island is "Kokovoko" rather than "Rokovoko". Could this have been intentional on Melville's part to emphasize the impossibility of locating this island? Probably not, but I like the idea.

[Queequeg's] father was a High Chief, a King; his uncle a High Priest; and on the maternal side he boasted aunts who were the wives of unconquerable warriors. There was excellent blood in his veins--royal stuff; though sadly vitiated, I fear, by the cannibal propensity he nourished in his untutored youth." Is Ishmael to some extent punning on the word "blood"? We speak of "royal blood" and "bad blood", and while it is true that people of Melville's time believed in such things as criminal tendencies being inherited, did they think that blood was the carrier? Maybe--it seems unlikely that there would be such insistence in keeping separate blood banks for whites and blacks during World War I if some people did not believe that blood was the carrier. On the other hand, there does seem something peculiar about the idea that Queequeg's royal blood has been diluted by the other humans he ate, especially since no one claims that the consumption of (non-human) animals dilutes royal blood.

"A Sag Harbor ship visited his father's bay ..." Sag Harbor, New York, is a village currently partly in Southampton and partly in East Hampton. It was extremely active in the whaling industry in the early 19th century.

Of Queequeg's consignment to manual labor in the outside world, Ishmael says, "But like Czar Peter content to toil in the shipyards of foreign cities, Queequeg disdained no seeming ignominy, if thereby he might happily gain the power of enlightening his untutored countrymen." In 1697 Peter the Great of Russia traveled to the Holland, where he lived incognito and worked in the shipyards there to learn enough to be able to establish a modern navy for Russia.

"He ... was fearful Christianity, or rather Christians, had unfitted him for ascending the pure and undefiled throne of thirty pagan Kings before him. But by and by, he said, he would return,--as soon as he felt himself baptized again. For the nonce, however, he proposed to sail about, and sow his wild oats in all four oceans." Again, Ishmael reverses the usual prejudices--while most of his Christian acquaintances would believe that extended contact with "savages" or "pagans" or "heathens" would defile them, Ishmael finds that Queequeg has the same concern about spending too much time with Christians.

There is, of course, an irony to Queequeg's statement that he will be ready to return after being "baptized again"--that is indeed Queequeg's fate, though his return to Rokovoko afterwards is questionable.

The four oceans Ishmael knew were the Atlantic, Pacific, Indian, and Arctic Oceans. In 2000, the International Hydrographic Organization recognized a fifth ocean, the Southern Ocean, which is all water below 60$deg; south.

***Notes:***

# **“LIKE CZAR PETER CONTENT TO TOIL IN THE SHIPYARDS OF FOREIGN CITIES, QUEEQUEG DISDAINED NO SEEMING IGNOMINY”**

Czar Peter, also known as Peter the Great, was born in the summer of 1672: his father’s fourteenth child and a product of his second marriage. Peter inherited his status and power from his family, which was the ruling family of Russia.

[](http://commons.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Peter_der-Grosse_1838.jpg)

Peter I, Emperor and Autocrat of All the Russias (portrait by Paul Delaroche, 1838). (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

For a time Peter shared power with his half-brother and competed with his sister and mother for control over Russia’s future, but Peter had come into his own as a ruler by the end of the 17th century. During his reign he would radically expand the territories and influence of the Russian Tsardom, mostly by means of what are considered by today’s standards as sweeping reforms based on Eurocentric ideas. He reorganized his military forces in accordance with Western standards, secularized schools, administered greater control over the reactionary Orthodox Church, and introduced new administrative and territorial divisions of the country. One of the chief means by which Peter accomplished the first of these reforms was to model his navy on the practices of the Dutch East India Company and the British Royal Navy; to do so, as Melville remarks in Moby-Dick, Peter worked incognito in foreign harbors, gathering information on these institutions so “he might happily gain the power of enlightening his untutored countrymen.”

It is somewhat strange that in the context of Chapter 12 of Moby-Dick Ishmael is comparing this famous Russian leader to humble Queequeg. The comparison makes sense considering the ethnographic impulse that lured Queequeg from a princedom on his native isle of Kokovoko to glean the habits and customs of Christendom, to acquire “the arts whereby to make his people still happier than they were.” Also, Peter the Great was reputedly very tall, about 6’8” (perhaps closer to Daggoo’s height than Queequeg’s). But the truth of the comparison ends there. Peter was reputedly a very brutal and ruthless man. He was known to drink excessively. He swiftly and violently suppressed any opposition to his policies on the part of his countrymen, especially after proclaiming Russia an Empire in 1721 (and, of course, naming himself Emperor). He even convicted his eldest son of high treason and had him secretly executed. This seems rather far from the charitable attitude that Queequeg so often exhibits toward his fellow man—“It’s a mutual, joint-stock world, in all meridians. We cannibals must help these Christians.” This is how Ishmael imagines Queequeg’s internal monologue after he serenely takes water after saving the life of a man who insulted him. The comparison between Czar Peter and Queequeg seems more interesting if we imagine what history would be if the former had been more like the later, not the other way around.

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

***Summary Part 1:***

[Queequeg](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/queequeg) tells [Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael), using his broken English, that he was born on a Pacific isle called Kokovoko—Ishmael says that the island “cannot be found on any map.” Queequeg’s father was the king of Kokovoko, and indeed much of his family possessed royal blood. But Queequeg, despite his high birth, wished to see the world, and when a ship visited Kokovoko from Sag Harbor, NY (a town on the eastern tip of Long Island), Queequeg “vowed a vow” to board the ship and partake in the adventures of a Christian sailor.

***Analysis Part 1:***

Interestingly, Melville spells this island name various ways in the course of the novel—probably simply as a mistake or oversight, although one wonders if Melville is imputing to Ishmael, the narrator, an inability to name exactly the island of Queequeg’s birth. Queequeg’s love of the sea is outstripped only by his desire to participate in the North American whaling trade.

***Summary Part 2:***

But the ship from Sag Harbor would not let [Queequeg](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/queequeg) aboard, and he paddled his canoe out to a strait, one the ship would have to cross. There he threw himself out of the canoe and climbed the side-rigging of the ship. Once aboard, the captain allowed him to stay and sail back to America, but Queequeg, despite his royal blood, was kept below-decks, with the other sailors. Though Queequeg was horrified by the dissipation and drunkenness of the sailors when they reached Sag Harbor and Nantucket, he continued life as a harpooneer on whaling vessels. Queequeg finishes his story, and when Ishmael informs Queequeg that he wishes also to join a whaling vessel from Nantucket, Queequeg pledges that he will “follow Ishmael wherever he goes,” and get onto the same whaling boat in Nantucket.

***Analysis Part 2:***

Queequeg does not fall into the stereotypes of the hard-drinking, hard-living whaler. He has no wife and no children; he does not drink and only smokes his ceremonial pipe; and indeed he does not seem given to having fun of any kind, although he is a warm and caring friend. Ishmael, who is far less stoic than Queequeg, and far less outwardly courageous, holds his friend’s moral virtue in high esteem. And Queequeg seems to sense that Ishmael will be a loyal friend to him, even as conditions aboard the Pequod deteriorate, and Ahab’s madness threatens to derail the entire voyage.