***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 14 –Nantucket***

***Summary:***

* The ferry arrives at Nantucket, a prime opportunity for Ishmael to tell us more about the history of the island.
* Nantucket is a lonely, isolated, sandy bit of land where hardly anything grows of its own accord and everything is surrounded by sea.
* Ishmael also relates a story about how a group of Native Americans came to settle Nantucket: an eagle came one day and carried away a baby, and the parents followed the bird until they came to the island—where they found the child’s skeleton. Grim.
* The people of Nantucket have always sailed the sea and used it to survive and prosper.
* At this point, Ishmael tells us, Nantucketers are all over the globe, in every ocean, and are the only people who truly belong on the water: it’s like their empire.

***Brief Analysis:***

Ishmael digresses from the story to discuss the island of Nantucket. He details some of the legends about its founding and some of the tall tales that are told about life on the island. He notes that a Nantucketer “owns” the seas and that this “empire,” covering two-thirds of the globe, is larger than that of any country.

***Analysis:***

Nantucket is a mere hillock and elbow of sand, all beach without a background. There is a wonderful traditional story of how the island was settled by the red-men when an eagle carried an infant Indian in his talons, and his parents followed the eagle in their canoes to the island, where they found the infant's skeleton.

Melville frequently shifts styles throughout Moby Dick, veering from the narrative to explore different genres of writing. In this chapter, he indulges in writing a travelogue describing the history and locale of Nantucket. The purpose of this is somewhat experimental and purely informative, adding depth and shading to the setting of the novel without actually contributing to the narrative drive of the story.

***Significance:***

The next morning, the two unlikely friends borrow a wheelbarrow to transport their belongings to a small boat that will take them to Nantucket. Along the way, [Queequeg](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/" \l "Queequeg) tells [Ishmael](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Ishmael) stories that illustrate the way people make funny mistakes when they are strangers in a new culture. They arrive at the boat, and it sails off toward Nantucket. Some of the "bumpkins" on board the small boat make fun of Queequeg, who throws one of them into the air. In the uproar that follows, the man is swept overboard by the boom of the sailboat, and Queequeg jumps in to save him from drowning.

The boat arrives in Nantucket in Chapter 14. Ishmael gives a bit of history of the island and elaborates on how the people of Nantucket became the masters of the sea, perfectly at home on it. Ishmael and Queequeg go ashore in Chapter 15 and find a place to stay, the Try Pots, famous for its chowder. Though it is dark out, they find their way to the inn and are rewarded with bowls of delicious clam chowder served by a cantankerous Mrs. Hussey. After eating, they go to bed.

These chapters continue to develop the friendship between [Ishmael](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Ishmael) and [Queequeg](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/" \l "Queequeg) as well as the idea that even though he is a pagan, Queequeg is more honorable than many Christians. Ishmael and Queequeg combine their belongings into one wheelbarrow, which is a lovely symbolic action used to show their unity in friendship. On the boat to Nantucket, the two are harassed by other passengers, but after Queequeg dives in after a man who falls overboard, the other men seem to come around. Ishmael is going to great lengths to show just how great a guy Queequeg is.

Mrs. Hussey appears in this chapter as a typical whaleman's wife, a no-nonsense woman who runs the affairs of home and business with efficiency while her husband is away at sea. Her inn is called the Try Pots, named after the large pots used to boil the whale oil out of the flesh, as described later in the novel.

Foreshadowing again plays an important role in setting the tone of these chapters, despite their rather lighthearted content. To Ishmael, the Try Pots sign looks like a gallows: "A Coffin my Innkeeper upon landing in my first whaling port; tombstones staring at me in the whalemen's chapel, and here a gallows!" Careful readers will also take note that Ishmael gives away part of the novel's ending in Chapter 13 as he compares Queequeg's dive to save a man with his "last long dive."

***Critical Study:***

"Nantucket! ... how it stands there, away off shore, more lonely than the Eddystone lighthouse." The Eddystone lighthouse is on the Eddystone Rocks, nine miles off the coast of Cornwall. Nantucket is even more isolated, being about twenty miles off the coast of mainland Massachusetts and fifty miles from New Bedford, at the time the closest population center. On the other hand, Nantucket is large enough that it had a substantial population itself, rather than just a lighthouse keeper.

"What wonder, then, that these Nantucketers, born on a beach, should take to the sea for a livelihood! They first caught crabs and quohogs in the sand; grown bolder, they waded out with nets for mackerel; more experienced, they pushed off in boats and captured cod; and at last, launching a navy of great ships on the sea, explored this watery world; put an incessant belt of circumnavigations round it; peeped in at Behring's Straits; and in all seasons and all oceans declared everlasting war with the mightiest animated mass that has survived the flood; most monstrous and most mountainous! That Himmalehan, salt-sea Mastodon, clothed with such portentousness of unconscious power, that his very panics are more to be dreaded than his most fearless and malicious assaults!" A quohog is a thick-shelled American clam. The British editions call it the quahogs. Behring's Straits is obviously an old name for what we call the Bering Strait, and "Himmalehan" is Melville's spelling for Himalayan. Its use emphasizes the description of the whale in the preceding sentence as "most mountainous." At the time Melville was writing, the mastodon was (almost) the largest land animal known, hence the appropriateness of using that appellation for the whale, the largest sea animal. Dinosaur fossils were not identified as such until 1838, and it was not until the end of the 19th century that the larger species were found. However, mastodons were actually smaller than mammoths, so one might expect Melville to say "salt-sea Mammoth". The problem with that, however, is that the word "mammoth" has come to mean almost anything big and would not necessarily evoke the image of a specific large land animal the way "mastodon" does.

"And thus have these naked Nantucketers, these sea hermits, issuing from their ant-hill in the sea, overrun and conquered the watery world like so many Alexanders; parcelling out among them the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian oceans, as the three pirate powers did Poland. Let America add Mexico to Texas, and pile Cuba upon Canada; let the English overswarm all India, and hang out their blazing banner from the sun; two thirds of this terraqueous globe are the Nantucketer's." The Nantucketers are compared to ants, symbols of industriousness and (along with bees) animal symbols of the "work ethic". The Alexander referred to here is Alexander the Great. The "three pirate powers" were Russia, Prussia, and Austria, who divided Poland up among themselves at the Congress of Vienna in 1815.

America added Mexico to Texas as a result of the Mexican-American War (1844-1847). The references to Cuba and Canada are more speculative as to what America wanted to do. The United States had invaded Canada in the past, and during the first half of the 19th century, Cuba was one of Spain's most loyal colonies, mostly out of fear of the United States. "Piling Cuba upon Canada" is a modification of Virgil's phrase "to pile Pelion on Ossa" (from the "Georgics". The reference there is to two giants, Otus and Ephialtes, who piled Mount Pelion on Mount Ossa in their attempt to storm Mount Olympus. The English had been "swarming over" India since the 18th century (note the repetition of ant imagery), and in Melville's time India was still run/ruled by the East India Company. It would not be until 1858 (after the 1857 Mutiny) that the British government would take over the governance of India.

"This terraqueous globe" is Earth, a mixture of land and earth surfaces, and approximately two-thirds of the surface is indeed water. (A more accurate, but less poetic, fraction would be 70%.)

"[He] hides among the waves, he climbs them as chamois hunters climb the Alps." Chamois are "goat-antelopes" that live in the mountains of Europe (the Alps, the Carpathians, the Tatras, the Balkans, and the Caucauses.

"[The] Nantucketer, out of sight of land, furls his sails, and lays him to his rest, while under his very pillow rush herds of walruses and whales." Actually, this is not likely. Walruses live in shallow waters, and the furthest away from land they get would be on the continental shelves. While that is out of sight of land, it is less likely that herds of whales would be rushing there rather than in deeper water. Melville's implication is that the ship is over deep ocean, but that is not the walrus's home.

***Critical Analysis:***

The long awaited arrival to Nantucket, where the people are “so shut up , belted about, every way inclosed, surrounded, and made an utter island of by the ocean, that to their very chairs and tables small clams will sometimes be found adhering, as to the backs of sea turtles”—[“the wondrous traditional story of how this island was settled by the red-men”](https://chasingflukes.com/reading_guide-overview/glossary/14maushop/)—early Nantucketers foraged (“caught crabs and [quohogs](https://chasingflukes.com/reading_guide-overview/glossary/18quohog/" \o "\“‘I say, Quohog, blast ye! dost thou sign thy name or make thy mark?’\”" \t "_blank) in the sand”), then came wading with nets for mackerel, then venturing out in boats, to “the navy of great ships on the sea” at the time of the book’s writing—at “everlasting war” with (gotta catch this adamant description of a whale) “the mightiest animated mass that has survived the flood; most monstrous and most mountainous! That Himmalehan, salt-sea Mastodon, clothed with such portentousness of unconscious power, that his very panics are more to be dreaded than his most fearless and malicious assaults!”—Nantucket sailors populate the globe, occupying waters of the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian oceans—the Nantucketer is a citizen of the sea, is he thus a citizen of the world, or rather is the world his own?—”two thirds of this terraqueous globe are the Nantucketer’s”—Nantucket is a sacred place for the sailor, the whaleman in particular—at nightfall it becomes serene, a place where the water and the sailor peacefully commune—“the Nantucketer, out of sight of land, furls his sails, and lays him to his rest, while under his very pillow rush herds of walruses and whales.”

***Notes:***

# **“THE WONDROUS TRADITIONAL STORY OF HOW THIS ISLAND WAS SETTLED BY THE REDMAN”**

Several traditional Native American stories endure to this day concerning the origins of the island of Nantucket. While there are many significant differences in these accounts, they all have in common the legendary giant of Wampanoag lore, Maushop, who was thought to have resided in the area of Cape Cod. In one legend, Maushop, having grown weary of trying fall asleep with sand in his moccasins, kicked off one moccasin, which landed in the sea and became Martha’s Vineyard; still unsettled and growing frustrated, he kicked off his other moccasin, still farther, and this became the island of Nantucket. The island’s native populations attributed the clouds of fog that settle in the area to the smoke from Maushop’s pipe. In Chapter 14 of Moby-Dick, Herman Melville relates yet another legend concerning Maushop and Nantucket:

Thus goes the legend. In olden times an eagle swooped down upon the New England coast, and carried off an infant Indian in his talons. With loud lament the parents saw their child borne out of sight over the wide waters. They resolved to follow in the same direction. Setting out in their canoes, after a perilous passage they discovered the island, and there they found an empty ivory casket,—the poor little Indian’s skeleton.

In the Wampanoag tradition it is not one but several children that were thus carried off by a giant bird from the area known today as Cape C[](https://chasingflukes.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/wamanoagsealmaushop.png)od, and it is not a party of Native Americans but the giant Maushop who, persuaded by the grieving mothers of the kidnapped infants, wades out into the ocean where he sees an unfamiliar island looming out of the mist. Here he discovers a heap of bleached bones beneath a tree, presumably the remnants of the repast of the feasting giant bird. Maushop then rested from his labors with a long, contemplative pipe that blanketed the island in a cloud of thick, grey-blue smoke.

The fact that Melville doesn’t mention Maushop (also spelled Moshup, Maushup, among others) by name in Moby-Dick might point to nothing more or less than his ignorance of the rich history of Wampanoag legends pertaining to Cape Cod, Martha’s Vineyard, and Nantucket. His interest in the version of the legend included in the chapter on “Nantucket” seems to be the sepulchral overtones of the island’s Native American pre-history. Perhaps Maushop should have attracted Melville’s attention more. After all, popular representations of the legendary giant often depict him fishing for whales with his bare hands in order to have them served at tribal feasts, as he is pictured in the tribal seal of the Wampanoag reservation at Aquinnah (or Gay Head, from where Tashtego hails). Maushop would seem to be a unique specimen of those early proto-typical whalemen in whom Ishmael the sub-sub is so often interested. In fact, Maushop might be considered his own whaleman and masthead in one and the same person.

[](https://chasingflukes.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/moshup-whalestanleymurphy.jpg)

“The Giant Moshup Catches a Whale,” mural by Stanley Murphy; Photo credit: Shelley Rotner, 2010.

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

***Summary Part 1:***

[Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) and [Queequeg](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/queequeg) arrive in Nantucket with no further misadventure. Ishmael fills this brief chapter with a rhapsody on the nature of Nantucket, where, as the story goes, a small Native American boy was once carried by a bird, and where his family went after to find him, and settled, thus founding the town. Nantucket is now almost entirely a port for whaling and fishing, and Ishmael remarks that, although the great colonial powers of the earth seek far and wide for land to add to their empires, Nantucket “controls two-thirds of the world” because its denizens control the seas, and make their money in pursuit of “walruses and whales.”

***Analysis Part 1:***

This one of the earliest of Melville’s, and Ishmael’s, fugues: short chapters on a theme unrelated to the general narrative thrust of the novel. Here, Ishmael takes a moment to underscore just how important Nantucket is to the whaling industry and to the economy of the US in the 1800s. Ishmael’s tone, characteristic throughout, is one of emphasis, and of great rhetorical rigor—in this chapter alone, he uses rhetorical questions, repetition, and other devices of ancient Greek and Roman rhetoric (or persuasive speaking) to convince the reader of his point.