***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 15 –Chowder***

***Summary:***

* Ishmael and Queequeg disembark from the ferry.
* It’s too late at night to do any business in Nantucket, so they go to an inn recommended by Peter Coffin called The Try Pots, run by Hosea Hussey, Peter’s cousin.
* The Try Pots is supposed to be famous for its chowders.
* It takes a little while to find the Try Pots, but eventually they manage.
* Ishmael thinks that the "sign" of the inn, which is two huge black pots hanging from an old mast, looks like a gallows.
* He wonders if all these symbols of death (a landlord named Peter *Coffin*, tombstones in the chapel, and something that looks like a gallows) might be a bad sign. You *think*?
* Hosea Hussey isn’t there, but Ishmael and Queequeg meet Mrs. Hussey, who asks them nothing but "clam or cod." This confuses Ishmael, but it turns out to be a question about what kind of chowder they want.
* They try both kinds, and both are excellent. (In fact, when you read the description, it’s hard not to want clam chowder for dinner. Actually, we’re kind of salivating here.)
* Our heroes discover that the Try Pots serves chowder every meal; the floor is paved with clamshells instead of tiles, and even the milk tastes like fish (because the cow eats fish heads).
* Ishmael and Queequeg head to bed.
* Mrs. Hussey insists that Queequeg leave his harpoon downstairs; a guest at the Try Pots was once killed in bed with his own harpoon.
* Ishmael orders both kinds of chowder for breakfast.

***Brief Analysis:***

Ishmael and Queequeg settle at the Try-Pots for the night, an inn owned by the cousin of the Spouter-Inn’s owner. Ishmael is disturbed by an old topmast above the inn that looks ominously like a gallows. Everything on Nantucket is touched by the sea: the milk tastes of fish, and the innkeeper’s wife wears a necklace of fish vertebrae. The two friends have a supper of hearty chowder.

***Analysis:***

On Monday morning, the two friends check out of the Spouter-Inn and tote their belongings in a wheelbarrow to the Moss, a small schooner that will take them to Nantucket where they hope to sign on with a whaler. Queequeg recalls two anecdotes revealing cultural differences. Aboard the schooner, some louts mock Queequeg; one of them is taught a lesson but then saved from drowning by the huge harpooner. Arriving in Nantucket after dark, the friends quarter at Mr. Coffin's cousin's inn, the Try Pots, Mr. & Mrs. Hosea Hussey proprietors, and are treated to excellent clam chowder as well as cod chowder.

Ishmael continues to learn about the amazing Queequeg. Certain cultural distinctions broaden the two men's insights. The wheelbarrow reminds the harpooner of his introduction to a similar device shortly after he left the islands. Loaned a wheelbarrow to help him move his belongings from a ship to a boarding house, Queequeg loaded it and then lifted and carried the barrow and his gear up the wharf, to the amusement of onlookers. He recalls another humorous event, on his island home, when a visiting white captain of a merchant ship mistook a sacred punch for a finger bowl and washed his hands in the liquid. Cultural blunders depend so much on one's point of view.

Queequeg's depth of character is demonstrated in an incident aboard the Moss when some ignorant country bumpkins mimic him behind his back, one especially rude fellow making the mistake of getting caught. Queequeg tosses the lout into the air but guides his landing, causing the fellow more anxiety than injury. Just as the captain is reprimanding the harpooner for this, the same bumpkin is knocked overboard by a free-swinging boom. Only Queequeg dives into the icy waters to save him. In this dramatic fashion, Melville further contrasts the products of so-called "civilized" and "barbaric" cultures, the advantage clearly going to the pagan. Queequeg is a great man in any setting.

Glossary

packet a boat that travels a regular route, carrying passengers, freight and mail.

boom a spar (pole) extending from a mast to hold the bottom of a sail outstretched.

quohog an edible clam having a large, thick, hard shell.

chowder a thick soup consisting of milk, various vegetables, salt pork, and clams or fish.

try pots vats used to melt or render whale blubber to get the oil.

***Significance:***

It is late in the evening when Queequeg and Ishmael reach Nantucket, and go to the Try Pots, owned by [Hosea Hussey](https://www.gradesaver.com/moby-dick/study-guide/character-list#hosea-hussey), the cousin of Peter Coffin. Two pots hang from a tree near the inn, looking like a gallows. The Try Pots serves chowder for breakfast and dinner, and is paved with clamshells.

Melville deflates a great deal of the tension that he had been building throughout the previous chapters through Ishmael's self-aware observations concerning the various ill omens he has discerned. Ishmael notes the various signs of death, including the gravestones, the name of his previous innkeeper (Peter Coffin), and the gallows imagery, as if performing a symbolic literary analysis of the novel as he narrates. Nevertheless, this does make the reader explicitly aware of the death-related imagery that pervades the novel, muting its ominous, foreboding tone but still making the possibility of great pain and suffering inevitable.

***Critical Study(13-15):***

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 Analysis:***

My wife and I have an ongoing, and very nerdy, joke about a paper we would write were we undergraduates again, titled “The Redemptive Power of Stew: Traditional Food Ways in Popular Culture.” This paper would follow Luke Skywalker, for example, to the cold outer reaches of the Dagobah system, where Yoda discards Luke’s energy-bar-like rations and begins his physical and spiritual training with a warm bowl of stew-ish looking stuff. We would also certainly cover Aunt Beast’s role in A Wrinkle in Time, whose nurturing food cures Meg of paralysis by reminding Meg of her mother’s stew. Stew repeatedly surfaces in literature as the ideal of home, family, and tradition. As such, stew has an enormous power to heal.

Other than illuminating Ishmael as something of a saucy fellow, “Chowder” interests me as a fine example of the redemptive power of stew. Arriving in Nantucket late in the evening, Ishmael and Queequeq follow the directions of their New Bedford inn keeper, Peter Coffin, who had recommended his cousin’s inn during their stay in Nantucket. Upon seeing this inn, called the Try Pots, Ishmael breaks into a panic of omen, because the sign in front of the inn looks like a gallows. Indeed, Ishmael had encountered a good deal of death imagery already in the early stages of his journey — a Coffin for an innkeeper, and tombstones in the chapel — but nothing perhaps worthy of panic. Nevertheless, Ishmael enters the inn with a heavy heart, only to be comforted by . . . chowder (stew!). Two bowls of chowder make Ishmael forget all his worries. Even when the innkeeper’s wife explains the inn’s policy against harpoons in the bedrooms, instated because of a recent suicide after a failed voyage, Ishmael is not distracted from thinking about breakfast, and the warm chowder therein.

***Notes:***

Ishmael and Queequeg are the most adorable [#bromance](https://chasingflukes.com/reading_guide-overview/chapter_summaries-home/chapter-summaries-part1/#bosom-friend) ever—On recommendation from Peter Coffin of the Spouter-Inn, the pair are in search of “Hosea Hussey of the Try Pots […] proprietor of one of the best kept hotels in all Nantucket, and moreover […] famous for his chowders.”—Ishmael and Queequeg are given terrible directions to this renowned chowder house, but eventually they find it—Ishmael once again opines on his death, this time dragging Queequeg into his sepulchral reveries as well—“The horns of the cross trees were sawed off on the other side, so that this old top mast looked not a little like gallows. Perhaps I was over sensitive to such impressions at this time, but I could not help staring at this gallows with a vague misgiving. A sort of crick was in my neck as I gazed up at the two remaining horns; yes, two of them, one for Queequeg, and one for me.”—Turns out Hosea is not at the Try Pots, but Mrs. Hussey is there to service the customers—Ishmael jokingly complains of a cold reception by Mrs. Hussey—he’s the rude one—Turns out he’s happy as a clam with the chowder that arrives—[“Oh, sweet friends! hearken to me.”](https://chasingflukes.com/reading_guide-overview/glossary/15try-pots-clam-chowder/)—Queequeg’s favorite “fishy” is the clam, too: that’s important—Ishmael runs an experiment and manages to place an order for more chowder, this time cod—”Fishiest of all places was the Try Pots”—even the milk tastes and smells like fish—Ishmael sees the Hussey’s dairy cow chewing up fish carcasses, with each hoof stuck in a fish head—yum—Near the end of the chapter, Mrs. Hussey takes Queequeg’s harpoon—she’s the woman of the house, and takes their breakfast requests—cod and clam and smoked herring—They’ll miss this variety of fare when they’re at sea.

“OH, SWEET FRIENDS! HEARKEN TO ME.”

Who is not tempted to salivatory envy by Ishmael’s brief but delicious description of the chowder served by Mrs. Hussey and co. at the Try-Pots in Nantucket in Chapter 15 of Moby-Dick?

[A] warm savory steam from the kitchen served to belie the apparently cheerless prospect before us. But when that smoking chowder came in, the mystery was delightfully explained. Oh! sweet friends, hearken to me. It was made of small juicy clams, scarcely bigger than hazel nuts, mixed with pounded ship biscuits, and salted pork cut up into little flakes! the whole enriched with butter, and plentifully seasoned with pepper and salt. Our appetites being sharpened by the frosty voyage, and in particular, Queequeg seeing his favourite fishing food before him, and the chowder being surpassingly excellent, we despatched it with great expedition.

Well, here is an opportunity to try your own luck at recreating the potluck at the Try-Pots. Adapting a recipe found in Mrs. Rorer’s Philadelphia Cookbook from the 1880s (only three decades past the publication date of Melville’s book), user “[Needs Mead](http://www.foodthroughthepages.com/author/acuriousjourney/),” on the fascinating blog “[Food Through the Pages](http://www.foodthroughthepages.com/),” provides the following recipe for Try Pots Clam Chowder:

Try Pots Clam Chowder Recipe

Total prep time: 1 hour

Yields about 2-3 servings

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

Cook’s Notes:  I didn’t need to add salt, as the salt pork provided exactly the right amount on its own, but a dash of pepper won’t go amiss. This recipe is adapted from one from Mrs. Rorer’s Philadelphia Cookbook, from the 1880s. This puts it just a few decades after the publication of Moby Dick, and on the right coast.

Ingredients:

25 clams, whole, in shells

1/4 lb. salt pork, diced

2 cups water

2 medium sized potatoes, peeled and diced large

1 onion, chopped fine

1/2 tsp. thyme

1/2 tsp. sweet marjoram

1/2 Tbs. parsley

salt & pepper to taste

1 cup milk

3 water crackers or 2 sea biscuits, crumbled

2 Tbs. butter

2 Tbs. flour

Instructions:

Wash clams thoroughly. Into a largeish saucepan, pour 1 1/2 cups water; then add the whole clams. Put a lid on and simmer until the shells open. Take the opened clams out of the pot, reserving the liquid in a separate container. Any clams that do not open should be discarded.

Line the bottom of the saucepan with the diced salt pork. Now put a layer of potatoes on the salt pork, then a sprinkling of onion, thyme, sweet marjoram, parsley, salt & pepper, then a layer of clams, and continue until all the ingredients are used. Add the water, which should be boiling and barely cover the whole. Cover and simmer for half an hour without stirring. Then add the milk and crackers, stir and cook ten minutes longer. Make a roux by melting the butter over medium heat, then stirring in the flour. Stir in a ladle or two of broth, then add the whole mix back into the chowder.

Serve hot, with extra biscuits on the side.

Needs Mead’s Thoughts: “Fabulous, if a little unconventional. The liquid reduces down, and the stewed potatoes begin to fall apart, such that the whole chowder becomes this dense concoction, much thicker than most chowders available at restaurants. Redolent with the goodness of spuds and onions, and just a hint of herbs, the chowder on the whole is flavorful and filling. Every so often a clam comes up in a spoonful, and is an extra treat. All in all, this seems to me an ideal chowder for taking the chill off after a long spell at sea.”

***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) disembark in Nantucket and, upon the recommendation of [Peter Coffin](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters), proceed to an inn owned by Coffin’s cousin, a man named [Hosea Hussey](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters). Ishmael and Queequeg, after some searching, find this inn—the Try Pots—and meet [Mrs. Hussey](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters), who is taking care of the inn while Hosea is out. Ishmael finds the picture of two gallows on the inn’s signpost to be unnerving, just as he found Peter Coffin’s name to be a strange foreboding of death. But the two go inside. Mrs. Hussey asks whether the two would like “cod” or “clam,” meaning cod or clam chowder, and the two men order both and eat their chowders with glee, as the soup is exceptionally delicious.

***Analysis Part 1:***

Even Ishmael, who purports to know something about marine culture, is confused by the two soup options, indicating that it is not only Queequeg who has trouble comprehending the customs and etiquette particular to the whaling town of Nantucket. Unlike Coffin, Mrs. Hussey takes a dimmer view of Queequeg’s “strange” activities in the room, as will be evidenced, later, by her unwillingness to let Queequeg continue in his “Ramadan,” or ritual fasting period, in the hotel room. Again Ishmael sees a name as foreboding, but with so many foreboding things can one really trust any of them?

***Summary Part 2:***

After commenting that all the food, all the rooms, indeed even the milk in the Try Pots smells of fish—Nantucket being a fishing town—[Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) goes with [Queequeg](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/queequeg) upstairs to bed. [Mrs. Hussey](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters) welcomes them to their room, saying only that she will take Queequeg’s harpoon from him, since once, at the same inn, a man was found dead, stabbed with his harpoon in the night. Ishmael and Queequeg fall quickly asleep.

***Analysis Part 2:***

Similarly, Mrs. Hussey does not want Queequeg to have his customary weapon—which, as above, he uses to shave and likes to keep wit him—since apparently the crowd at the Try Pots can be a rowdy one. This again seems to indicate that Mrs. Hussey does not completely trust this “cannibal” who stays under her roof.