***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 17 –Ramadan***

***Summary:***

* Ishmael leaves Queequeg alone all day to perform his religious observances with Yojo, since this is apparently a special religious holiday for Queequeg.
* Ishmael tells the reader that he believes in religious tolerance and a live-and-let-live attitude.
* In the evening, Ishmael assumes that Queequeg is finished with his holiday and goes upstairs to their room, but the door is locked. Ishmael calls, but there’s no answer.
* Ishmael looks through the keyhole. He can’t see Queequeg, but he can see Queequeg’s harpoon, so he assumes the man is there somewhere.
* Ishmael tries to break the door down and can’t. He runs downstairs and finds a maid and then the landlady, Mrs. Hussey, and tries to convince them to pry the door open.
* When Mrs. Hussey understands what’s going on, she’s afraid that there’s been another suicide at her inn.
* She orders the maid, Betty, to go get a sign made that says "no suicides permitted here, and no smoking in the parlor" (17.10). (Sounds useful to us.)
* The landlady tries to keep Ishmael from breaking down the door and damaging the inn, but Queequeg has bolted the door from the inside and no key or locksmith will help.
* Ishmael goes ahead and breaks the door down in spite of Mrs. Hussey’s objections.
* When they get into the room, they find Queequeg sitting in the middle of the floor holding Yojo on top of his head. He doesn’t move or speak.
* They try to get Queequeg to move or respond, but he won’t, so finally Ishmael sends Mrs. Hussey away and sits beside Queequeg, since he can’t do anything else.
* After a while, Ishmael goes downstairs and has supper, then goes back to bed. Queequeg is still sitting in the same position and not speaking. Ishmael’s starting to get pretty pissed.
* Ishmael puts his heavy jacket around Queequeg’s shoulders to keep out the cold and goes to bed. It takes him a long time to fall asleep because he’s worried about Queequeg. (Aww!).
* At sunrise, Queequeg gets up and tells Ishmael that his holiday is over.
* Ishmael makes Queequeg get into bed and tries to explain that extreme ascetic behavior—such as fasting, meditating, and sitting still in uncomfortable positions for long periods of time—is ridiculous and unhealthy and causes indigestion.
* Ishmael is equally critical of Lent (a Christian fast), Ramadan (a Muslim fast), and Queequeg’s own tribal customs. (Note that Ishmael calls Queequeg’s fast "a Ramadan," but this is just a general use of the term to mean a religious fast. Queequeg isn’t Muslim.)
* Ishmael asks Queequeg if he’s ever had indigestion. Queequeg says only once, when his people won a major battle and cooked and ate fifty of their captives.
* Ishmael stops him before he explains any more about his tribe’s cannibalistic customs.
* Queequeg doesn’t seem affected by Ishmael’s lecture about religious customs; in fact, he seems to pity Ishmael for not knowing better.
* Ishmael and Queequeg get up, eat a breakfast of chowder, and head to the *Pequod*.

***Brief Analysis:***

Returning to the inn, Ishmael allows Queequeg a day for his “Ramadan” ceremonies and then worries when his friend doesn’t answer the door in the evening. When the panicky Ishmael finally gets the door open, he finds Queequeg deep in meditation. Queequeg is unresponsive and continues to meditate until the next morning. Ishmael talks to Queequeg about the discomforts of Queequeg’s religion. The next day, after a large breakfast, they return to the Pequod.

***Analysis:***

Queequeg's Ramadan, or Fasting and Humiliation, continues all day, so Ishmael does not disturb him until night. Ishmael considers how foolish some religious traditions are, whether Presbyterian or Pagan. When Ishmael returns to his room, he finds it locked, and panics because he sees that Queequeg's harpoon is missing. He makes Mrs. Hussey unlock the door (there is some suspicion that Queequeg has committed suicide), but they find Queequeg inside, calm and self-collected, holding his Yojo idol on his head and not saying a word. Queequeg does not speak for the entire day, until finally he presses his forehead against Ishmael's and declares that his Ramadan is over. Ishmael suggests to Queequeg that fasts are nonsense, bad for the health and useless for the soul. Ishmael believes that fasting makes the body and the spirit cave in.

Although [Herman Melville](https://www.gradesaver.com/author/herman-melville) has approached matters of religious belief with a directness and seem approval as a significant part of human existence, he still remains quite critical of some aspects of religious belief. This chapter illustrates the belief espoused by Ishmael that religious practices are in some sense odd and in many instances detrimental; the message appears to be that spiritual practices should be, in a very distinct sense, useful, and that practices such as fasting have direct negative consequences. Ishmael relates the possibility that Queequeg has committed suicide to his religious beliefs, and cites experience to show that those religions with the most harsh practices are those whose followers become sickly in mind and in temperament.

The greatest argument refuting Ishmael's claim is the very character of Queequeg himself. As the most poised and noble of the characters in the novel, Queequeg demonstrates the judgment and temperament that contradicts the idea of sickness and ill-humor as promoted by Ishmael.

***Significance:***

I once argued that it would not be absolutely immoral to peel a man’s face off and cover it in lemon juice. I was young and, to be fair, playing devil’s advocate for moral relativism. I argued that although I thought peeling a man’s face off seemed wrong, and although I would do everything I could to stop such an act if the unfortunate opportunity arose, I couldn’t see where a “correct” morality could come from, since I believe neither in personified God nor in a master race or culture.

Ishmael also struggles with the restrictions of his culture’s imposed morality early in Moby-Dick as he tries to understand and accept Queequeg as a dear friend. Queequeg worships idols; Ishmael identifies as a Presbyterian. Queequeg’s people eat dead enemy soldiers after a battle; Ishmael’s people prefer to leave dead enemies unconsumed. Impressively, Ishmael challenges his own beliefs several times in the course of the book, and particularly in Chapter 17, “The Ramadan.” Forced by his faith in his friend’s goodness, Ishmael steps over countless moral lines he previously drew in the sand until, upon realizing that Queequeg has to do the same for Ishmael, he has to let it be. In the end, the two friends come together to share an exceptionally big breakfast “so that the landlady should not make much profit by reason of [Queequeg’s] Ramadan.”\*

Clearly, neither Ishmael nor Queequeg come from cultures with so obviously wrong norms as the peeling of faces off, but I think both situations beg the same worthy question: In the absence of God and ethnocentrism, where does our sense of morality come from? And can we consider that moral sense absolute?

I have yet to find a satisfying answer to these questions. For now, and most likely for always, I’ll have to stick by my faith that most people want to be good, and do good for others. Perhaps that striving alone — forcing the recognition and consideration of the needs, wants, and feelings of others — forms our moral sense, or perhaps that humanistic striving serves as a higher calling, beyond the simple act of following a set of rules.

\*Ishmael refers to Queequeg’s fast as a Ramadan, not to be confused with the Muslim holiday.

***Critical Study:***

Ishmael registers several remarks about his own exemplary religious tolerance—”I say, we good Presbyterian Christians should be charitable in these things”—however, in the same breath he says some of the rudest things here with respect to Queequeg’s religious observances—reducing his new friend’s ritual fasting to “humiliation” and his beliefs to “half-crazy conceits”—then follows an amusing scene where Ishmael freaks out upon returning to the Try Pots—Queequeg won’t answer the door, so Ishmael thinks, [“Apoplexy! […] ‘apoplexy!’”](https://chasingflukes.com/reading_guide-overview/glossary/17apoplexy/)—calls for an axe to break down the door—ends up crashing through it with his body—Queequeg maintains his statuesque posture, Yojo perched atop his head, for hours and through the night—giving in, finally, Ishmael takes his heavy bearskin jacket and throws it over Queequeg’s shoulders before going to bed—Queequeg does not move until the sun comes up the following day, when he returns to bed—There, Ishmael tries to persuade Queequeg to accept the absurd irrationality of ritual fasting—”all thoughts born of a fast must necessarily be half-starved”—doesn’t make any sense, and it’s unhealthy besides—Queequeg does not responded beyond a look of “condescending concern and compassion”—Ishmael is “lost to evangelical pagan piety”—they dress, eat breakfast, and make their way to the Pequod as if nothing has happened between them—”sauntering along, and picking [their] teeth with halibut bones.”

***Critical Analysis:***

"I cherish the greatest respect towards everybody's religious obligations, never mind how comical, and could not find it in my heart to undervalue even a congregation of ants worshipping a toad-stool; or those other creatures in certain parts of our earth, who with a degree of footmanism quite unprecedented in other planets, bow down before the torso of a deceased landed proprietor merely on account of the inordinate possessions yet owned and rented in his name." The ants and the toad-stool seem to be specific to any particular story, but I cannot help but feel that the reference to the "deceased landed proprietor" is supposed to have a specific referent.

"I say, we good Presbyterian Christians should be charitable in these things, and not fancy ourselves so vastly superior to other mortals, pagans and what not, because of their half-crazy conceits on these subjects. There was Queequeg, now, certainly entertaining the most absurd notions about Yojo and his Ramadan;--but what of that? Queequeg thought he knew what he was about, I suppose; he seemed to be content; and there let him rest. All our arguing with him would not avail; let him be, I say: and Heaven have mercy on us all--Presbyterians and Pagans alike--for we are all somehow dreadfully cracked about the head, and sadly need mending." Ishmael begins by talking about how absurd Queequeg's religion is, and just when he has gotten the reader to agree with him, he throws out the zinger: that Presbyterians are just as "dreadfully cracked about the head" in regards to religion as the Pagans they denigrate are.

Ishmael becomes convinced that Queequeg is in trouble in his locked room, and thinks, "Apoplexy!" Then he meets the chamber-maid and "quickly [states his] suspicions to her," and she cries out, "Mistress! murder! Mrs. Hussey! apoplexy!" Apparently "apoplexy" was not a mere passing thought, but Ishmael must genuinely have thought that Queequeg had suddenly lost consciousness (the historical meaning of apoplexy). Where the chambermaid got "Murder!" is not clear, but probably from her own over-active imagination.

"Mrs. Hussey soon appeared, with a mustard-pot in one hand and a vinegar-cruet in the other, having just broken away from the occupation of attending to the castors, and scolding her little black boy meantime. ... I was unmethodically rushing up stairs again empty-handed, when Mrs. Hussey interposed the mustard-pot and vinegar-cruet, and the entire castor of her countenance." "Castor" is apparently an alternate spelling for "caster", a small bottle, pot, or shaker for holding a condiment. "The entire castor of her countenance" is a play on words of the previous "castor" and the phrase "cast of countenance" (meaning form, appearance, or character).

The "little black boy" is a presumably a servant, since slavery was abolished in Massachusetts in 1781. He is a parallel on land to Pip on the sea.

"It's unfort'nate Stiggs done over again there goes another counterpane--God pity his poor mother!--it will be the ruin of my house. Has the poor lad a sister? Where's that girl?--there, Betty, go to Snarles the Painter, and tell him to paint me a sign, with--"no suicides permitted here, and no smoking in the parlor;"--might as well kill both birds at once." Stiggs's suicide was mentioned earlier. While Mrs. Hussey tries to seem concerned, her practicality wins out in trying to pay for only one sign even though the two admonitions are so disparate.

Queequeg is "squatting on his hams ..." A ham is a cut of meat from the hind thigh of an animal, so Queequeg is squatting on his legs. This sounds a bit redundant--how else could he squat?

[His] Ramadan only comes once a year; and I don't believe it's very punctual then." Another reference that seems to refer to the Muslim Ramadan cycling through the year.

"schooner ... brig" A schooner has fore and aft sails with the forward mast no taller than the rear masts. A brig has two square-rigged masts.

Queequeg has missed breakfast and lunch, and Ishmael admonishes him, "For heaven's sake, Queequeg, get up and shake yourself; get up and have some supper. You'll starve; you'll kill yourself, Queequeg." Between this and the "apoplexy" concerns, Ishmael seems rather excitable; surely no one would think that not eating for a single day will starve an otherwise healthy person. (See my comments earlier on Jewish and Muslim fasting.)

"But as soon as the first glimpse of sun entered the window, up he got ... and said his Ramadan was over." Apparently Queequeg's religious days run from sunrise to sunrise (rather than the sunset to sunset of Jewish days, or the sunrise to sunset of Muslim fasting). This is re-inforced by the earlier statement, "Next morning early, leaving Queequeg shut up with Yojo in our little bedroom ..." [Chapter 16,]

"I have no objection to any person's religion, be it what it may, so long as that person does not kill or insult any other person, because that other person don't believe it also. But when a man's religion becomes really frantic; when it is a positive torment to him; and, in fine, makes this earth of ours an uncomfortable inn to lodge in; then I think it high time to take that individual aside and argue the point with him." Then Ishmael tries to convince Queequeg that all this fasting and mortification of the flesh is contrary to reason and causes "dyspepsia": "hell is an idea first born on an undigested apple-dumpling; and since then perpetuated through the hereditary dyspepsias nurtured by Ramadans. I then asked Queequeg whether he himself was ever troubled with dyspepsia; expressing the idea very plainly, so that he could take it in. He said no; only upon one memorable occasion. It was after a great feast given by his father the king, on the gaining of a great battle wherein fifty of the enemy had been killed by about two o'clock in the afternoon, and all cooked and eaten that very evening."

"Dyspepsia" is simply indigestion. Queequeg clearly refutes Ishmael's contention that abstinence causes dyspepsia; rather, it is caused (at least in his case) by over-indulgence, and one could certainly argue that it is unlikely that fasting would cause indigestion at all. Also, Ishmael is having a bit of fun with us, setting so precise a time as "two o'clock in the afternoon" in a culture without timekeeping devices other than the sun, the moon, and the stars.

A pilau is a dish of rice flavored with spices and cooked in stock, to which meat or fish may be added.

It is unlikely that parsley was placed in the mouths, though, as parsley is a Mediterranean herb, and while one finds it throughout the lands settled by Mediterraneans, I do not think it would be found on Rokovoko.

At first when Peleg says "he let no cannibals on board that craft, unless they previously produced their papers," one might think he meant some sort of sailor's papers, and it sounds almost like Ishmael's comments about not sleeping two in a bed, but then applying all sorts of easy qualifiers on it. But no, Peleg wants baptism papers, presumably to re-assure himself that he has abandoned his cannibal ways.

***Notes:***

# **“APOPLEXY! […] ‘APOPLEXY!’”**

The word “apoplexy” comes from the Greek ἀποπληξία (apoplexia), meaning “to be struck down utterly.” The ancients believed that someone who suffered a stroke (or any sudden incapacity) had been struck down by the gods. In Melville’s day the word was used as a blanket term to refer to any malady caused by an effusion of blood or serum in the brain that resulted in loss of consciousness or death. The term was used more widely before advancements in medical science allowed for more sophisticated distinctions concerning the causes of illness or death; nowadays what was once known as apoplexy would be interpreted as a stroke or a heart attack. The term apoplexy is still in use today to describe sudden loss or influx of blood-flow to a particular organ, as in adrenal apoplexy and pituitary apoplexy.

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

“Apoplexy” from The Dictionary of Daily Wants (1858-1859)

Apoplexy has been used as a plot device throughout literary history; it is referred to as “napoplexie” in Chaucer’s “Nun’s Priest’s Tale” (from The Canterbury Tales), and it is referred to as “appoplexi” in Shakespeare’s Henry IV, Pt. 2.  Because so many deaths remained sudden-seeming and unexplainable before the evolution and refinement of medical science, apoplexy was a common “explanation.” On the one hand, it is understandable that Ishmael, when he discovers Queequeg is still locked in their room but will not answer any of his hails, assumes his friend has suffered from apoplexy. What else could incapacitate such a man as Queequeg other than an internal, unexpected killer? As it turns out, Queequeg’s devout spiritual observances (which Ishmael dubs his “[Ramadan](https://chasingflukes.com/reading_guide/glossary/17ramadan/)”) are what had rendered him deaf to Ishmael’s concern. It is ironic that Ishmael—equipped with his “civilized,” secular knowledge—later tries to persuade Queequeg that his ritual observances are so inefficacious and unhealthy, when he himself had just been shouting to the heavens what would later be understood as a primitive and savagely generic diagnosis. In hindsight, the idea of such a quiet, generic death for a badass like Queequeg is very laughable indeed.

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

***Summary Part 1:***

[Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) returns to the Try Pots and attempts to get into the room he shares with [Queequeg](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/queequeg), but, although he sees through a crack in the door that Queequeg’s harpoon is inside (having been taken at some point from [Mrs. Hussey](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters) during the morning), Queequeg is nowhere to be found. Ishmael goes off to find Mrs. Hussey, worried that Queequeg has disappeared or harmed himself, and Mrs. Hussey thinks that Queequeg, like the man before him, has died in his room of a harpoon wound. But Mrs. Hussey doesn’t want Ishmael to break down the door. In his haste, however, Ishmael cannot wait, and he rushes at the door, only to find Queequeg sitting quietly inside, with his wooden idol [Yojo](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters) seated atop his head.

***Analysis Part 1:***

Queequeg’s serenity is remarkable, and is often a source of veneration for Ishmael. Here, Ishmael wonders how Queequeg could possibly be able to sit all alone, for an entire day, without food or water, and without human contact. But it is precisely this internal strength in Queequeg that Ishmael finds so admirable, indeed inspirational. Ishmael, for his part, is often scared of the difficulties of whaling—for example, when his whale-boat first capsizes—and he continually looks to Queequeg for guidance and support.

***Summary Part 2:***

[Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) is relieved to find [Queequeg](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/queequeg) there, and believes that this day of prayer, his “Ramadan,” or fast, cannot last much longer. Queequeg is unresponsive to Ishmael’s questions, and Ishmael goes down to dinner, coming back to find Queequeg in the same position. Queequeg still will not respond to Ishmael or even acknowledge his presence, and Ishmael goes to sleep, at last convincing Queequeg to listen to him. Queequeg ceases his fast and pays attention to Ishmael as the latter delivers a speech on religious custom. Ishmael says he has no reason to make fun of Queequeg’s religious rite, but he continues that fasting itself is bad for the body, and that all religious rites are somewhat silly if taken to extremes.

***Analysis Part 2:***

Another important piece of wisdom, derived by Ishmael from his experiences with Queequeg. Here, Ishmael realizes a principle that would now be called the moral relativity of religions—the idea that religious custom itself varies across the world, and that these variations might seem strange to parties outside the religion, even as they are perfectly normal to the religion’s adherents. Ishmael slowly learns more about himself, his friend Queequeg, and about the wider world as the novel continues.

***Summary Part 3:***

[Queequeg](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/queequeg) does not understand much of [Ishmael’s](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) speech, however, and when Ishmael asks if Queequeg’s stomach ever becomes upset after a fast, Queequeg responds that, when his village kills many enemies in a fight and eats them in large numbers after the battle, no one, even those eating lots of human flesh, ever has stomach trouble. Ishmael finds this story strange and unnerving, but nevertheless falls asleep with Queequeg, and in the morning, both eat a large breakfast, leave the Try Pots, and make their way to the Pequod, to begin their voyage.

***Analysis Part 3:***

Here, however, Ishmael has a bit more trouble understanding a simply “relativistic” difference between Queequeg and himself—Ishmael would never eat human flesh. Melville clearly delights in the portrayal of Queequeg as a cannibal, but as a “kind” one, who would only eat his enemies in battle—never his friends. It is further humorous—and illustrative of the divide in understanding between Queequeg and Ishmael—that Queequeg sees fit to explain that cannibalism never leads to stomach trouble, as if that was Ishmael's concern about it.