***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 18 –His Mark***

***Summary:***

* When Ishmael and Queequeg get to the *Pequod*, Captain Peleg and Captain Bildad say that they don’t take cannibals or non-Christians on their ship.
* Captain Bildad asks if Queequeg is a Christian, and Ishmael says that he’s a member of the First Congregational Church.
* When Captain Bildad starts asking about a particular local church with that name, and how long Queequeg has known the man who runs it, Deacon Deuteronomy, Ishmael explains: Queequeg is a member of the First Congregational Church in the sense that he’s a member of "the great and everlasting First Congregation of this whole worshipping world" (18.12). In other words, he’s human.
* Captain Peleg is impressed by Ishmael’s mind-twisting rhetoric and agrees to take Queequeg on board without more proof of his religious conversion.
* For some reason—we speculate on possible reasons in Queequeg’s "Character Analysis"—Captain Peleg calls Queequeg "Quohog," which is the name of a type of clam. (And, if you watch *Family Guy,* Quohog is the name of the town where the Griffin family lives on the coast of New England. The town is named after the clam, which is local to that area.)
* Captain Peleg asks Queequeg if he’s ever harpooned a whale. Queequeg takes his harpoon, points at a small spot of tar in the water, and throws the harpoon so that he hits the spot exactly.
* After Peleg and Bildad see this demonstration of Queequeg’s skill, they’re falling all over themselves trying to sign Queequeg up for the voyage of the *Pequod*. They give him the 90th lay.
* When it’s time for Queequeg to sign his name, he takes the pen and copies a symbol onto the paper that matches one of the symbols tattooed on his arm.
* Captain Bildad gives Queequeg a copy of a religious tract encouraging him to convert before the Apocalypse.
* Captain Peleg objects, saying that harpooneers have to be wild and devilish men.
* Bildad reminds Peleg of the time when Peleg was Ahab’s first mate and the ship was caught in a typhoon—he must have thought about the afterlife then.
* Peleg denies it; he says he was just thinking about how to stay alive.
* Bildad turns his back on Peleg and goes to watch some sailors fixing a sail and to pick up little bits of material that might go to waste.

***Brief Analysis:***

Though the owners object at first to his paganism, Queequeg impresses them with his skill by hitting a tiny spot of tar on the water with a harpoon. They give him the ninetieth lay, “more than ever was given a harpooneer yet out of Nantucket.” Bildad tries to convert Queequeg to Christianity, but Peleg tells him to give up: “Pious harpooneers never make good voyagers—it takes the shark out of ’em; no harpooneer is worth a straw who ain’t pretty sharkish.” Peleg reminds Bildad that, at sea, practical concerns shove religious matters aside.

***Analysis:***

Captain Peleg gruffly tells Ishmael that no cannibals such as Queequeg can go aboard unless they previously produce their papers. Ishmael tells Peleg that Queequeg is a member of the First Congregational Church, but Peleg and Bildad are both skeptical. Ishmael finally says that Queequeg belongs to the same ancient catholic church as all do, the congregation of the world. Peleg makes Queequeg, whom he calls Quohog, write his name, and he signs using the infinity symbol, an exact counterpart of a figure tattooed on his arm.

The idea of naming is a significant theme throughout Moby Dick, for each of the odd names of the novel has some significance, usually biblical. Melville has established a strong relationship between the name of many characters and the characters themselves (Ishmael, Peter Coffin). In Moby Dick, names serve as a key to the character, more than just an identifying mark and rather a key to their respective personalities. For Queequeg, his name as he writes it is literally part of him, tattooed on his arm. Therefore the assumption that Queequeg cannot be Christian because of his name and the mispronunciation of his name as "Quohog" symbolizes a loss of identity on his part by the estimation of Peleg.

***Significance:***

The last image of “His Mark” sticks with me as representative of the whole chapter. Captain Bildad walks the Pequod’s deck, picking up stray sail patches or bits of “tarred twine,” to save the waste. He doesn’t sweep and save all the scraps, just the ones, I guess, that strike his fancy. In doing so, Bildad acts out the final echo of a selective salvation that threads throughout the entire chapter.

A clever double meaning lies in the title of “His Mark.” The title certainly refers to the mark on Queequeg’s arm, which he copies as a signature when he signs on as a member of the Pequod’s crew. The title also refers to the mark of salvation that God leaves on the souls of converts. After signing Queequeg on as crew, Bildad attempts to convert Queequeg to Christianity, and he is met with intense protest from Captain Peleg. Peleg recounts a story of a man who was once the best harpooneer in Nantucket. The man “joined the meeting,” and lost his will as a harpooneer, because he worried so greatly about spiritual repercussions of his vocation. Peleg does not want to “ruin” another great harpooneer with the mark of God on his conscience. And so Queequeg is not privy to a choice that Bildad and Peleg deem essential to all other men.

It seems a horrifying usury, a devilish contract of morality signed over not in blood but in the very text of Queequeg’s flesh. But that explanation doesn’t quite fit, since Queequeg doesn’t compromise anything in the transaction, let alone his morality. As Christian believers, on the other hand, Bildad and Peleg implicate themselves in moral corruption through their hypocrisy — they are their own devils, asking Queequeg to give up his soul for money. Queequeg negates their damnation for himself by not writing the other half of the story — I get the sense that Queequeg is so far out of the story that he doesn’t even realize the possible subtext to his actions. Concerns of moral relativism aside for the moment, Peleg’s storied harpooneer and Queequeg both make perfect sense to me — they live by their beliefs. But why do Bildad and Peleg write themselves into a moral narrative wherein they intend to commit such great evil?

***Critical Study:***

In response to a question about Queequeg's religion, Ishmael says, "Why, ... he's a member of the first Congregational Church. ... Queequeg here is a born member of the First Congregational Church. He is a deacon himself, Queequeg is. I mean, sir, the same ancient Catholic Church to which you and I, and Captain Peleg there, and Queequeg here, and all of us, and every mother's son and soul of us belong; the great and everlasting First Congregation of this whole worshipping world; we all belong to that; only some of us cherish some queer crotchets no ways touching the grand belief; in that we all join hands." This is more than a way to placate Peleg and Bildad about hiring Queequeg; it is a statement of Ishmael's religious beliefs. All his other statements and attitudes support this and provide a contrast to the religious beliefs common in New England at that time.

It is true that earlier he said, "I was a good Christian; born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church." [Chapter 10, ] But now he says, "[Queequeg] no doubt thought he knew a good deal more about the true religion than I did." One could, I suppose, argue that he is sincere in his first statement and sarcastic in his second, but I do not think so. Unless he is some sort of henotheist, he is being sarcastic both times, and believes neither church "true" or "infallible," although both claim it.

"Deacon Deuteronomy Coleman" has another one of those Biblical names, this one even more bizarre than most. "Deuteronomy" comes from the Greek words for "second" and "law" and refers to the second giving of the law. It hardly seems like a reasonable first name. But this was a generation in which there was a general named States Rights Gist, and in our time we have gone through a phase of names such as America, Sunshine, and Freedom.

The Philistines were ancient enemies of Israel, but the term has also come to mean someone generally uncultured, a barbarian.

Melville must have liked the word "skylarking". First he uses it to refer to Peter Coffin's misleading of Ishmael regarding Queequeg. Then Bildad uses it regarding Queequeg's membership in the First Congregational Church, and later Stubb is accused of skylarking.

The Hittites to which Bildad refers are the Biblical Hittites, who are a tribe (or perhaps different tribes at different times) which may not be the same as the tribe known archaeologically as the Hittites. Then are often allies of the Hebrews rather than enemies, so while Bildad sees Queequeg as a Philistine--an enemy--Ishmael is a Hittite, or an ally.

Peleg calling Queequeg "Quohog" is an example of how little importance he attaches to him as an individual. Certainly "Quohog" is an obvious misnomer, being (as earlier noted) a type of clam. Later he calls him "Hedgehog" as well.

Queequeg gets the 90th lay, while Ishmael got the 300th lay. That means that Queequeg would get more than three times as much as Ishmael. This reflects both the high value of a good harpooner and the low value of an inexperienced whaler such as Ishmael.

When Queequeg signs his contract, he uses his sign rather than a signature, and his sign is the symbol for infinity (the lemniscate), invented by John Wallace in 1655. Is Queequeg a connection to the infinite, in the spiritual sense?

"[Bildad] took out a bundle of tracts, and selecting one entitled "The Latter Day Coming; or No Time to Lose," placed it in Queequeg's hands ..." There may well have been such a tract, but so far as I can tell, Melville made up the title. Note that the "Latter Day" referred to here is clearly Judgment Day, while the "Latter Day" in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints" means merely the modern day (modern times).

Bildad exhorts Queequeg, "I beseech thee, remain not for aye a Belial bondsman. Spurn the idol Bell, and the hideous dragon ..." "Bell" is the idol Bel from the Apocryphal book "Bel and the Dragon". It also appeared as Chapter 14 of the Book of Daniel in the original King James Version, but was later dropped from the Protestant Bible. See note for [Chapter 3]. It is mentioned in Article VI of the Thirty-Nine Articles (see [Chapter 16]).

You might think that "Belial bondsman" also refers to Bel (and I suspect that Melville intends us to believe that Bildad thinks so), but in fact Belial is one of the four Crown Princes of Hell and is mentioned in II Corinthians 6:15.

Peleg says, "Pious harpooneers never make good voyagers--it takes the shark out of 'em; no harpooneer is worth a straw who aint pretty sharkish. There was young Nat Swaine, once the bravest boat-header out of all Nantucket and the Vineyard; he joined the meeting, and never came to good. He got so frightened about his plaguy soul, that he shrinked and sheered away from whales, for fear of after-claps, in case he got stove and went to Davy Jones." This is presumably the same Nathan Swain who killed fifteen whales in a single day with a single harpoon (). However, a boat-header is the one in charge of the whaleboat, who usually stands in the stern and kills the harpooned whale with a lance. It would seem unusual for one to be both a harpooner and a boat-header.

To "join the meeting" is the Quaker equivalent of joining a church. The origin of the name "Davy Jones" is unclear, but "Davy Jones' Locker" is the sea floor, the final resting place of drowned sailors. A jury-mast is a temporary mast erected to replace one that has been broken or lost. (Its rigging is also temporary, hence our term "jury-rigged".)

When Bildad suggests that Peleg was pious during a terrible storm--at least in the sense of thinking of "Death and the Judgment", Peleg replies, "When every moment we thought the ship would sink! Death and the Judgment then? What? With all three masts making such an everlasting thundering against the side; and every sea breaking over us, fore and aft. Think of Death and the Judgment then? No! no time to think about Death then. Life was what Captain Ahab and I was thinking of; and how to save all hands--how to rig jury-masts--how to get into the nearest port; that was what I was thinking of." This reminds one of the claim that there are no atheists in foxholes. Bildad puts forth what is basically that premise, while Peleg denies it, in some sense claiming that in the heat of battle (or other crisis), religion is the last thing on people's minds. (Then again, there is, I suppose, a difference between being in a foxhole waiting for a battle, and in the battle itself.)

***Critical Analysis:***

Queequeg and Ishmael finally arrive to the ship, where the first thing they hear is “no cannibals on board [this] craft, unless they previously produced their papers”—Captain Bildad: “He must show that he’s converted. Son of darkness…”—to Captains Bildad and Peleg Ishmael delivers a lengthy avowal of Queequeg’s spiritual character—Ishmael argues how the cannibal is a member of the First Congregational Church, the universal church of mankind—Peleg is impressed with Ishmael’s sermonizing—”Young man, you’d better ship for a missionary, instead of a fore-mast hand; I never heard a better sermon.”—but the men need more convincing—Queequeg dramatically demonstrates his skill as a harpooneer by striking a “glistening tar spot” out on the water—he throws his harpoon right over Bildad’s head!— Captain Peleg immediately gives [Queequeg, or “Quohog,”](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) the nineteenth lay and wants him to sign the ship’s muster role—on this paper Queequeg signs a cross, which is tattooed on his arm as well—Captains Bildad and Peleg have another heated debate on the virtues of pious whalemen—[“‘He got so frightened about his plaguy soul, that he shrinked and sheered away from whales, for fear of after-claps, in case he got stove and went to Davy Jones.’”](https://chasingflukes.com/reading_guide-overview/glossary/18davy-jones/)—“no time to think about death then”—Captain Peleg, at a time of great distress, was thinking about life—Captain Bildad has nothing else to say.

***Notes:***

# **“‘I SAY, QUOHOG, BLAST YE! DOST THOU SIGN THY NAME OR MAKE THY MARK?’”**

In the context of Moby-Dick “Quohog” does not refer to the famous hometown of Peter Griffin and his family but rather to a famous marine creature. A quohog (or quahog) is “a large, rounded, edible clam […] of the Atlantic coast of North America,” also referred to as a “hard clam, hardshell clam” (OED). One can’t imagine that this clam is referenced in many renowned literary works besides Moby-Dick; it is commonly referred to, however, in the pages of historical documents, New England periodicals such as the Rhode Island Monthly, dietetics literature, and in cookbooks. The spelling of the word often differs between “quohog” and “quahog”; it is assumed that Melville chose to spell it in the “quo”-fashion due to its regional pronunciation. The first reference to the quohog occurs in Chapter 14, “Nantucket,” when Ishmael describes the early maritime harvests of the island’s inhabitants: they “first caught crabs and quohogs in the sand.” The word “quohog” recurs in the book four chapters later, but this time it has an entirely different meaning.

When Captain Peleg is trying to communicate to Ishmael his permission to ship Queequeg aboard the Pequod, he refers to the proven harpooneer thus: “tell Quohog there—what’s that you call him?” Now, initially the mistake seems innocent enough. One can’t expect that Peleg has often happened upon a name like Queequeg (recall the kneejerk reaction he and Bildad had to the sight of the man). One might even have a laugh at Queequeg’s expense, hearing him likened to a creature having a course exterior and a soft, squishy, delicious inside; after all, this is not far off the mark from how Melville characterizes him. Still, the misidentification of Queequeg seems more strikingly sad and bitingly ironic when it is intimated that Peleg records Queequeg’s name in the ship’s log as “Quohog.” It is beneath this word that Queequeg signs “his mark,” as if he were signing off on this ridiculous moniker. And about this “mark,” should we take this as his genuine signature? Just the one he uses for his Euro-American employers? Some generic stand-in? Or something else entirely?

  Quohog.

his X mark.

Now, Queequeg, it may be imagined, never thought much of the offense, but Melville might be making a larger point here about the ways in which history can be erased by the mere slip of a tongue. In the event, say, of a disaster at sea which made it so the Pequod never returned from this voyage, Queequeg—owing precisely to his heritage and background, or more properly to Peleg’s inability faithfully to record it—would only be remembered in the ship’s articles, should someone think to consult them, as “Quohog.” Melville might have been more attuned than the average whaleman to the ways in which foreign peoples’ work and dedication to the whaling industry has gone forever unrecorded: an historical negligence, we might add, which not only extended to whaling but to other enterprises that helped make America what it is today. Consider the records of the names, birthplaces, and birth-dates of the victims of the slave trade.

# **“‘HE GOT SO FRIGHTENED ABOUT HIS PLAGUY SOUL, THAT HE SHRINKED AND SHEERED AWAY FROM WHALES, FOR FEAR OF AFTER-CLAPS, IN CASE HE GOT STOVE AND WENT TO DAVY JONES.’”**

When one hears the name Davy Jones, a fearsome half-man, half-creature with a face covered in tentacles who captains the ghostly Flying Dutchman might come to mind. Thank you, Disney, for that creative vision of one of the most well-known and time-honored legends of the sea. The real Davy Jones, however, is far different than the character from Pirates of the Caribbean. Myths about Davy Jones are almost universal among sailors; most of them point to the belief that he is more of a spirit who haunts the seas than a real person. Indeed, he is the essence of death at sea and his “locker,” or the sea floor, is the hell where drowned sailors and sunken ships were damned for eternity. He is the embodiment of a sailor’s deepest, superstitious fear. Yet, despite the agreement on what Davy Jones is, it is not entirely clear how his legend was born.

There is some evidence that the legend was born from a real living person. An old sailor song from 1594 called “Jones’s Ale is Newe” features a bartender named David Jones who drugged his patrons and sold them as slaves to passing ships. Another explanation of the legend is that Davy Jones derives from the patron saint of Wales, David, whom sailors called upon in times of need; given this argument, the current prevailing myth of Davy Jones would represent an almost complete inversion of its original meaning. The legend could also stem from an actual sailor, David Jones, who made his living pirating the waters of the Indian Ocean in the 1600s. The most interesting theory, however, ties the legend’s origin to the biblical story of Jonah, who is swallowed by a giant whale after being thrown overboard by a ship’s crew. Sailors identified more with Jonah’s shipmates trying to avoid sharing in his misfortune than with the reluctant prophet himself. It is thought that the name Davy Jones derived from a tradition of seamen intoning the biblical figure as “Devil Jonah.”

[](http://commons.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Punch_Davy_Jones%27s_Locker.png)

Davy Jones’ Locker (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

The first published record of the legend of Davy Jones appeared in 1726, in the book The Four Voyages of Captain George Roberts by Daniel Defoe. More than a hundred years later, he appears in Melville’s Moby-Dick, mentioned by Captain Peleg in connection with a skilled harpooneer who, when he found religion, got so nervous about the state of his soul that whenever he had to face down a whale he quivered for fear of being stove and sent to Davy Jones. (The context is Peleg’s reluctance to refuse such a skilled harpooneer as Queequeg a place aboard the Pequod because he is unconverted.) Peleg’s naming of Davy Jones in connection to being stove might lead us to detect the ghostly presence of this old sea-spirit every time the anxiety of being stove is acknowledged by the whalemen, as it often is in Moby-Dick. To what tune do they pull? “A dead whale or a stove boat!” Behind this we might hear: “A dead whale or Davy Jones!”

The fear and celebration of Davy Jones is just as relevant today as it was in Melville’s day. A battle hymn circulating among the sailors of the U.S. Navy states: “Roll out the TNT, Anchors Aweigh. / Sail on to victory / And sink their bones to Davy Jones.”

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

***Summary Part 1:***

As [Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) and [Queequeg](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/queequeg) approach the Pequod, [Peleg](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters) and [Bildad](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters), from the wigwam, exclaim that they wish Ishmael had told them that Queequeg is a “heathen,” and that all “heathens” who ship out on a whaling vessel from Nantucket must show paperwork proving they have converted to Christianity. To this, Ishmael counters that Queequeg is a member of the “First Congregational Church,” and when Bildad asks if this is the First Congregational in Nantucket, Ishmael replies that Queequeg is instead a member of the universal church of “believers,” and that this qualifies him as well as anyone to ship on the vessel. This appears to convince Peleg, especially after Queequeg demonstrates his accuracy with the harpoon by throwing it directly at a small speck in the water, from the deck.

***Analysis Part 1:***

Ishmael attempts to show Peleg and Bildad what he has learned about the “oneness” of man’s religions—that, so long as man prays to a higher power, it does not really matter whether this power is called the Christian God or the God of some other religious group. It is not clear the extent to which Peleg and Bildad actually believe in Ishmael’s explanation, but they apparently want Queequeg as a member of the ship’s crew, and so are willing to pretend that his “Christian” faith is satisfactory.

***Summary Part 2:***

But [Bildad](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters) persists in wanting [Queequeg](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/queequeg) to convert the Christianity, pressing into his hand a religious tract in English, which Queequeg cannot read, even after Queequeg has “signed” his ship documents by putting his “mark” underneath his name, as written by [Peleg](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters). When Bildad continues bringing up the subject of Christian providence, and how God’s help has aided the Pequod on numerous voyages, Peleg contests Bildad, saying that Peleg himself and Ahab’s desire to avoid death kept the ship afloat during previous misadventures at sea—and that God’s “desire” for the ship had nothing to do with it. But Bildad mumbles about Providence to himself as he walks away from Peleg, [Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael), and Queequeg.

***Analysis Part 2:***

It was apparently rather common in the 1800s for people to sign with “marks,” rather than with signatures, especially if those signers were not able to write their own names—and this was more common than one might imagine. Although there is a long line of legal basis for signing “by mark,” here Bildad wonders if they haven’t made a mistake allowing a “pagan” onto the vessel. The disagreement between Bildad and Peleg about whether God cares about the ship is indicative of larger debates about God and God's interaction (or lack thereof) with the world.