***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 19 –The Prophet***

***Summary:***

* Ishmael and Queequeg leave the *Pequod* and are stopped by a badly dressed stranger with a fascinating skin disease.
* The man asks if they have agreed to sail in the *Pequod*, and Ishmael says that they have.
* The sinister stranger asks if they’ve also sold their souls, if they have any. Ishmael doesn’t know what he’s talking about.
* Then the man asks if they’ve met "Old Thunder," which is apparently Captain Ahab’s nickname. Ishmael says they haven’t, and that all they know is that he’s "a good whale hunter, and a good captain to his crew" (19.22).
* The stranger says that both of these things are true, but that there’s more: Ahab once seemed dead for three days after a mysterious happening, and he’s done other strange and terrible things.
* And, of course, he lost a leg to a whale on his last voyage.
* Ishmael asks the man to be clearer, but the man just says that, if they’ve already signed the papers, then what’s done is done.
* Ishmael thinks the man is trying to scam them in some way, and that there isn’t really any sinister secret lurking behind Captain Ahab.
* Ishmael asks the man his name, and the man says "Elijah."
* Ishmael and Queequeg walk away, talking about how ridiculous the man is—and then Ishmael notices that Elijah is following them.
* Ishmael turns around and starts going back the way they came.
* Elijah doesn’t follow, so Ishmael feels a little bit better.

***Brief Analysis:***

Just after signing the papers, Ishmael and Queequeg run into a scarred and deformed man named Elijah, a prophet or perhaps merely a frightening stranger, who hints to them about the peril of signing aboard Ahab’s ship. He drops references to several frightening incidents involving Ahab, but Ishmael and Queequeg disregard the man’s warnings.

***Analysis:***

A stranger passes Ishmael and Queequeg and asks them whether they have signed the articles, and whether this means that they have signed their souls. He then asks if they have souls at all to sell. The stranger asks if they have met Old Thunder (Captain Ahab). Ishmael says that Captain Ahab is ill, but the strangers says that when Captain Ahab is all right, then his left arm (which he does not have) will be all right. The stranger tells them that Ahab lost his leg. The stranger introduces himself as [Elijah](https://www.gradesaver.com/moby-dick/study-guide/character-list#elijah), then Ishmael and Queequeg leave him.

The character Elijah has a small but significant role in the novel, serving much as his biblical counterpart as a prophet for Ishmael as he begins his voyage. The whaling voyage appears more and more ominous thanks to the appearance of this prophet, who indicates that Ishmael has sold his soul by agreeing to undertake the three year voyage on the Pequod. Also, the mythic connotations to Ahab continue in this chapter with the reference to him as "Old Thunder," an allusion to the Norse God of War.

***Significance:***

[Ishmael](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Ishmael) goes to see the boats that are available to decide which one he and [Queequeg](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/" \l "Queequeg) will try to sail on. There are three ships, and he investigates each one, finally deciding that the ship *Pequod*—a "rare old craft"—is the best one. It is owned by Captain Peleg who tells him the captain on the voyage will be [Captain Ahab](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Captain_Ahab), a man with only one leg, the result of an encounter with a whale. As Ishmael is signing up for the voyage, he meets the other owner, Captain Bildad. They negotiate Ishmael's wages, and Peleg describes Captain Ahab—who Ishmael has not met—as "a grand, ungodly, god-like man."

Back at the inn and locked in their room, Queequeg is observing a religious fast in Chapter 17. However, Ishmael begins to worry that something is wrong because Queequeg is so quiet and will not answer his knock. When Ishmael bursts through the locked door, Queequeg is squatting, immobile, with his little idol. Ishmael can get no response from him, but the next morning Queequeg gets up, stretches, and seems fine. They breakfast on chowder and set off for the *Pequod* to get Queequeg signed up.

Peleg and Bildad are suspicious of Queequeg at first in Chapter 18, but Ishmael convinces them to give him a chance. Queequeg impresses the two men with his amazingly accurate harpoon throw, and they hire him on the spot. Bildad advises him to leave his pagan ways for Christianity, but Peleg notes that "pious harpooners never make good voyagers."

In Chapter 19, Ishmael and Queequeg have just left the *Pequod* and are walking down the street when they encounter a man. The man asks them if they have signed on to ship out with the *Pequod*, and they answer *yes*. The man also asks them some odd questions, including whether they have seen "Old Thunder" yet. When asked about this, the man tells them he means Captain Ahab, captain of the *Pequod*. He goes on to make cryptic comments about Ahab. This stranger's name turns out to be Elijah. Elijah's comments and his name unsettle Ishmael a little, but after they have walked on further, he decides to dismiss them.

In this section, readers meet Captain Bildad and Captain Peleg, two retired whalemen who now own their own ship, the *Pequod*. They are both Quakers. The two work well together—they stage a comical "negotiation" between themselves about how much pay they will offer [Ishmael](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Ishmael), which manages to convince Ishmael to accept the 300th lay, less pay than he had expected.

The name *Pequod* is significant. Ishmael explains that it is the name of a tribe of Native Americans who once lived in Massachusetts. He notes that the tribe is "now extinct." Yet this seems to raise no red flags for him (as it might for the reader) as he chooses the ship anyway.

The contrast between Father Mapple's Christianity and Ishmael's makes another appearance. When Bildad asks [Queequeg](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/" \l "Queequeg) if he is a member of a church, Ishmael tells him (quite eloquently) that Queequeg is a member of "the great and everlasting First Congregation of this whole worshipping world," as is "every mother's son and soul of us." Peleg responds that Ishmael would make a good preacher, as his "sermon" was so good "Father Mapple himself couldn't beat it."

Most important, however, is that this section introduces the character [Captain Ahab](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Captain_Ahab). First, Peleg describes Ahab in contradictory terms—both "god-like" and "ungodly." If that's not odd and unsettling enough, on the way back to the inn from the ship, Ishmael and Queequeg run into a strange character with the name of a biblical prophet. (In I Kings, the Bible says that God sent a prophet named Elijah to prophecy King Ahab's destruction.) This prophet-like stranger makes several mysterious comments that seem, to Ishmael, "ambiguous, half-hinting, half-revealing." Although Ahab himself will not appear in person for many chapters, already a great deal of myth and larger-than-life story has grown up around him. Ishmael is uneasy, and perhaps readers are as well.

***Critical Study:***

At the risk of offending my sister, I’m going to write about her cat, Jack. If Jack were my actual human nephew, I would not like him very much. He hides himself away all day, and shows himself just long enough to hiss at me or meow in a anthropomorphically suggestive way. Then he runs off for another five hours. My biggest problem with his behavior is the fact that my family reacts by talking about Jack for the next four of those five hours, wondering what he meant by that meow, and hoping that he’s ok. I joke that Jack needs to start a training tutorial to teach celebrities how to get everyone thinking about you without having to be nice to anyone.

The titular character of “The Prophet,” has clearly taken Jack’s tutorial. He accosts Ishmael and Queequeg soon after they sign on to the Pequod’s crew. He speaks in “ambiguous, half-hinting, half-revealing, shrouded sort of talk,” about Ahab, and about their souls. Ishmael, a well-read storyteller himself, knows how this sort of thing goes, and notes that “It is the easiest thing in the world for a man to look as if he had a great secret in him.” Even so, Ishmael can’t help but to think about Elijah’s words long after they leave Elijah at the dock. Ishmael says that Elijah’s words “begat in me all kinds of vague wonderments and half-apprehensions, and all connected with the Pequod.” It seems Elijah could teach us all a thing or two about authoring novels as well — compelling stories (like Moby-Dick) often do the same, and by using similar methods.

In fact, much of “The Prophet” reads as somewhat meta-. By so obviously invoking literary conventions, and then having Ishmael reject them outright, Melville seems to criticize the laziness of convention while conceding it efficacy as narrative device. For example, physical disfigurement in literature often belies a greater purity of character (the Hunchback of Notre Dame, Tiny Tim, Esther in Bleak House, Isaiah, Gerty McDowell in Ulysses), and Melville gives his “prophet” Elijah a face disfigured by smallpox. And what about naming this crazy man on the dock Elijah, a prophet from the reign of King Ahab in Israel, who will return to announce the Messiah? Bible references lend an irresistible mystical quality to any story. More than anything else, “The Prophet” announces the coming of a different kind of book — self aware, and toying with convention.

***Critical Analysis:***

"He was but shabbily apparelled in faded jacket and patched trowsers; a rag of a black handkerchief investing his neck. A confluent small-pox had in all directions flowed over his face, and left it like the complicated ribbed bed of a torrent, when the rushing waters have been dried up." The word "trowsers" is an alternate spelling of "trousers"; apparently spelling was somewhat less strict in the 19th century and variants of words were common. Confluent small-pox is a severe form in which the lesions are not distinct but form large patches of disease.

"[Nothing] about that deadly skrimmage with the Spaniard afore the altar in Santa?-- heard nothing about that, eh? Nothing about the silver calabash he spat into?" A calabash is a bottle gourd. In this case, it seems to be a spittoon, possibly in the shape of a bottle gourd. (One professor seems to believe this sentence indicates that Ahab spat into the holy water because it follows some comment about a skrimmage in a church, but "calabash" is just too specific a word for a receptacle for holy water, which is usually called on font.)

"[If] you are only trying to bamboozle us, you are mistaken in your game." "Bamboozle" sounds like too new a word for Melville, but it actually dates to around 1700.

The stranger they meet is named Elijah. Elijah was a prophet during the reign of King Ahab, and indeed Ahab's major opponent, so the stranger is not just any prophet but the namesake of the original Ahab's nemesis.

Queequeg and Ishmael agree "that he was nothing but a humbug, trying to be a bugbear." A bugbear is a type of hobgoblin, while a humbug is merely a deceiver.

However, there is still an element of doubt in Ishmael's mind as to whether Elijah was following them, or it was his imagination]

***Notes:***

A stranger approaches Ishmael and Queequeg and wants to know (he knows) whether they’ve shipped with the *Pequod*—he makes vague remarks about souls—”A soul’s a sort of fifth wheel to a wagon.”—Ishmael proposes they leave, but the stranger calls them back—he goes on into a long, irksome speech quizzing Ishmael and Queequeg over their knowledge of Captain Ahab—how he lost his leg, when he lost his leg, where, the silver calabash he spat into, and other mysterious innuendos—by this time Ishmael starts thinking that the man isn’t wrapped too tight—he brushes off the stranger’s suggestions; he knows “all about the loss of [Ahab’s] leg”—Ishmael: “if you have anything important to tell us, out with it. […] It is he easiest thing in the world for a man to look as if he had a great secret in him.”—the stranger: “you are just the man for him—the likes of ye”—eventually they part ways, but not before Ishmael inquires after the stranger’s name—”Elijah.”—Elijah continues to follow Queequeg and Ishmael for a while at a distance—eventually he passes them again without saying another word to them—Ishmael is relieved—declares the man “a humbug.”

***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) are leaving the Pequod, they run into a man who does not identify himself, who asks if the two know the history of the Pequod, and of its Captain [Ahab](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ahab), whom the man calls “Old Thunder.” When the man persists, asking if Ishmael and Queequeg have signed the papers, and making insinuations and sighs—“what’s be will be,”—when Ishmael says that they have signed, Ishmael fires back, asking if the man has information about Ahab and his history that he wants to share. Ishmael adds that it is easy for a man to “pretend that he has a secret,” if he simply does not say entirely what he means.

***Analysis Part 1:***

The novel is, in many ways, a novel of prophecies, and in this chapter, the commentary of Elijah is no exception. Elijah seems to know that Ahab's search for the white whale will end in bloodshed for the crew. And yet it isn't clear whether Elijah is simply making an educated guess—based on the obvious fact of Ahab’s “monomania”—or whether Elijah does in fact have the ability to read the future, or if Elijah himself is crazy. Regardless, the dubious value of the prophet's prophecies is further marked by the fact that they come too late—Ishmael and Queequeg have already signed up.

***Summary Part 2:***

But the man says only that [Ahab](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ahab) lost his leg to a whale, and under suspicious circumstances. [Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) asks the man’s name, and he replies that it’s [Elijah](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters), which Ishmael recognizes as the name of a Biblical prophet. Elijah asks also if Ishmael and Queequeg know about the “prophecies” regarding the Pequod, but when Ishmael asks for more information, Elijah leaves, then turns and follows many yards behind the two as they continue to walk along the wharf. Finally, however, when Ishmael decides to turn around and ask Elijah to explain his mysterious insinuations, he sees that Elijah has disappeared.

***Analysis Part 2:***

Elijah is also notable for his unwillingness to say, straight out, what he has prophesied regarding the ship and its crew. Once again Melville has filled the novel with omens and prophecies, while what is being prophesied or foreboded is entirely unclear, or made clear only in hindsight. And this is how it usually is with prophecy, that they imply that they will tell the future, but are understandable only in hindsight, when the future has come to pass. And it further highlights how men are always searching for clues to the future, to what will happen, and believe that they see such signs, but never really can know what "will be."