***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 20 –All Astir***

***Summary:***

* For the next several days, everyone is busy getting the *Pequod* ready for her voyage. Captain Peleg stays on the ship overseeing things and Captain Bildad is in charge of buying supplies.
* Ishmael and Queequeg get their trunks packed and loaded on the ship, but they keep sleeping at the inn until they have to leave.
* The ship not only needs lots of supplies, it needs lots of spares of everything that can’t be replaced once it leaves the harbor.
* Ishmael says that it’s practically two ships rolled into one; the only things that aren’t doubled are the ship itself and the captain.
* The person in charge of most of the supplies is Captain Bildad’s sister, who is called Aunt Charity. (Charity is actually her first name; the "Aunt" part is more of a nickname.) She’s always bringing some little thing on board that might help.
* While the ship is being outfitted, Ishmael and Queequeg keep asking about Captain Ahab, but he never shows up. They try not to worry about it, but not knowing the man who’s going to be their captain for three years is disturbing.

***Brief Analysis:***

Over the course of several days, the ship is provisioned for the coming voyage. Ishmael hears that Ahab’s health is improving—he is still recovering from the loss of his leg—but he and Queequeg have yet to meet the mysterious captain.

***Analysis(17 – 20):***

That evening, Ishmael waits until after dark to return to the room because Queequeg is fasting (a form of Ramadan) until sunset. The door is bolted from within. The landlady and Ishmael are concerned, and Ishmael breaks open the lock. Queequeg is fine but in a religious trance, which continues until dawn. That day, Queequeg signs on with the Pequod. Shortly after leaving the ship, the two friends are approached by a raggedy prophet of doom named Elijah who speaks of serious problems with Ahab. Ishmael judges the prophet a "humbug" (impostor). The ship is stocked and prepared for a long voyage.

While Ishmael tries to understand others' religions, he has difficulty accepting the extremes of what he sees as fanaticism, especially when health is threatened. He is equally opposed to Ramadan and the Christian Lent. Fasting, he argues, starves both the body and the soul, each of which thrives on sound digestion. Hell, he concludes, "is an idea first born on an undigested apple-dumpling"! His speech is wasted on Queequeg, who may be putting Ishmael on as he claims that his only indigestion occurred when his father's warriors killed fifty of the enemy in an afternoon and the tribe had barbecued and devoured them by evening.

The religious theme continues as the owners of the Pequod insist that Queequeg, whom they call "Quohog" (a kind of clam), must be a Christian in order to sail on their boat. Ishmael argues that Queequeg is a member of "the great and everlasting First Congregation of this whole worshipping world," a reference to the genuine spirituality and humanity of his friend. The owners accept Ishmael's "sermon" good-naturedly but are more impressed when Queequeg demonstrates his marksmanship with the harpoon. They sign him to a ninetieth lay.

In this context, the warnings of the shabbily dressed prophet of doom, Elijah, might well be dismissed as just another distortion of hypocrisy or spiritual fervor. Ishmael tries to treat them that way. Yet there is something legitimately foreboding about the stranger, which goes beyond humbug. He seems to know a good deal about Captain Ahab, whom he calls "Old Thunder," and makes references to various mysteries in the captain's past, including a deadly fight with a Spaniard and the loss of the leg. Ishmael and Queequeg will soon hear more from Elijah.

Glossary

Ramadan the ninth month of the Muslim year, a period of daily fasting from sunrise to sunset; here, a reference to Queequeg's abbreviated religious fast.

apoplexy a brain hemorrhage or stroke, causing convulsions, paralysis, etc.

sagacious wise.

dyspeptic suffering from indigestion.

abashed embarrassed, ill at ease.

Elijah a biblical prophet of doom (1 Kings 21:17-19).

ineffable that cannot or dare not be put into words because too overwhelming or sacred.

***Significance:***

There is great activity aboard the Pequod, as the sails are mended and preparations for departure come to a close. The sailors store the Pequod with the food and amenities necessary for the three year voyage. Ishmael only half fancies being committed to so long a voyage, but prepares to sail the next morning.

The preparations for departure underscore the vast nature of the voyage on the Pequod. This is no short-term commitment that Ishmael and Queequeg are making; they are sacrificing three years of their lives for this voyage, and Ishmael only has a partial commitment to the journey. The ambivalence that Ishmael feels toward the voyage affects his narrative; by making his view of the voyage unclear, Melville makes him an even more impartial narrator rather than one with a specific and identifiable agenda.

***Critical Study:***

I’m terrible at packing for short trips. My mind all too quickly jumps to the many possible situations that may come to be, and before you know it, I have two or three times the stuff I actually need. A typical packing list for a one week trip may include twelve t-shirts (what if it rains and I have to change?), three pairs of shoes (flip flops for the plane, converse for day-to-day, and something leather in case it rains), extra pairs of socks and underwear (it might rain), at least two more books than I could possibly read, a notebook, a backup notebook, sheet music to read, drawing pens (just in case), and so on and so on. I even overpack when visiting my parents, with a washing machine (and dryer) readily available, and Powell’s Books a short drive away. I can’t help it.

Aunt Charity, Captain Bildad’s sister, packs the Pequod similarly. She has better reason than I, though, since a whaling voyage lasts three years at least, and many comforts to which the crew are accustomed would not be available in foreign ports at that pre-globalized period in time. Clearly I missed my true calling by 150 years or so.

***Critical Analysis:***

Peleg stays on board, while Bildad does the provisioning. Is this because Peleg is too easy-going, and as the more serious of the two, Bildad feels that he should do the negotiating? (Remember that Peleg offered a much bigger share to Ishmael than Bildad ().

Regarding this provisioning, Ishmael says that "whaling ... necessitates a three-years' housekeeping upon the wide ocean, far from all grocers, costermongers, doctors, bakers, and bankers. And though this also holds true of merchant vessels, yet not by any means to the same extent as with whalemen. For besides the great length of the whaling voyage, the numerous articles peculiar to the prosecution of the fishery, and the impossibility of replacing them at the remote harbors usually frequented, it must be remembered, that of all ships, whaling vessels are the most exposed to accidents of all kinds, and especially to the destruction and loss of the very things upon which the success of the voyage most depends." We now understand why Peleg was so dismissive of the merchant service that Ishmael had seen, and apparently Ishmael has come to agree with him even before the voyage starts.

Aunt Charity is Captain Bildad's sister. Later we find out that Stubb is her brother-in-law (). That means that: 1) Stubb is married to another sister of Charity and Bildad, 2) Charity is (or was) married to Stubb's brother, or 3) the relationship is a bit more distant (e.g., Stubb is the brother of Bildad's wife, and is called Charity's brother-in-law by extension).

***Notes:***

A day or two passes—”great activity” aboard the *Pequod*; “the ship’s preparations were hurrying to a close”*—*Ishmael and Queequeg find out that they will be setting off on their three-year whaling voyage at any time—their personal belongings need to be brought on board—they decided to sleep ashore for their last night—everyone’s bustling to outfit the ship for the voyage—”spare everythings, almost, but a spare Captain and duplicate ship”—once it sets sail, the opportunities to restock the ship are rare indeed—meet Aunt Charity, who is Captain Bildad’s sister—”if *she* could help it, nothing should be found wanting in the Pequod, after once fairly getting to sea”—Ishmael describes her like a guardian angel—while Charity bustles about, Bildad checks items of a list and Peleg roars at everyone working on the ship —Ishmael briefly supplies that there should have been more foreboding in his heart for the mere fact that he had not yet laid eyes on Ahab—”the man who was to be the absolute dictator of [the voyage]” and thus Ishmael’s life for the next three years—in spite of his ominous feeling, Ishmael’s already too far in—the ship’s ready to set sail, so Ishmael and Queequeg make an early start the next morning so not to miss their ride.

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

***Summary Part 1:***

[Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) reports that, for the next few days, [Bildad](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters) and [Peleg](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters) orchestrated the packing of the ship for a three years’ journey—the typical amount of time a whaling vessel is on the high seas. Although some things, like food, utensils, and similar provisions, can be picked up at other ports along the way, most whaling implements (including harpoons) are specialized and must be packed with care before the voyage begins. Ishmael notes that Bildad’s sister, named [Aunt Charity](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters), helps to pack the boat for the journey, bringing along pickles, flannel, and other goods. Ishmael closes the chapter by stating that [Bildad](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters) and [Peleg](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters) never allowed Ishmael to see Ahab before the ship set sail, and although this should have worried Ishmael at the time, he thought very little of it, assuming [Ahab](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ahab) had good reason for staying away from the ship until it pushed off.

***Analysis Part 1:***

Melville and Ishmael adore chapters like these, in which they can list all the items one finds on a ship—just as Ishmael identifies many different types of whales, many different types of native societies, and other long lists of people and things throughout the novel, in chapter-length digressions. Here, Ishmael’s purpose seems to be rather simple: to prove to the reader just how much needs to go onto a boat in order to allow dozens of men to survive, in at least marginal comfort, for a number of years, without prolonged access to ports of call along the way.