***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 21 –Going Aboard***

***Summary:***

* Around 6 a.m., Ishmael and Queequeg go to join the ship, which is going to sail today.
* They see some men running ahead of them and start to worry that they’re late and the ship is already off. They hurry to catch up.
* Before they can get to the ship, Elijah grabs hold of Ishmael, but they shake Elijah off and keep going.
* Elijah follows them and asks if they saw any men ahead of them. Ishmael admits that they did. Elijah tells him to try and find them again, and then wishes them well and says he’ll see them at the Last Judgment.
* Ishmael and Queequeg board the ship and find everything quiet and nobody around anywhere. They go below decks and find an old rigger asleep.
* The sailors Ishmael saw are nowhere to be found, and it turns out that Queequeg didn’t see them at all.
* Queequeg sits down on the sleeping rigger’s behind, which is cushiony enough to make a good seat, in his opinion. Ishmael makes him knock it off.
* They sit there, smoking Queequeg’s tomahawk-pipe, as the man keeps sleeping. Queequeg explains that it’s traditional in his country to use fattened slaves as chairs and couches.
* Queequeg appears to threaten to kill the man, and talks to Ishmael about the two-in-one function of his tomahawk-pipe. Fortunately, at this point, the smoke wakes the man up.
* The old rigger tells them that the ship will sail today, and that Captain Ahab came aboard last night.
* There’s a noise from above, and Ishmael and Queequeg follow the rigger up to the deck.
* The crew is starting to come on board and things get busy, but Captain Ahab remains hidden in his cabin.

***Synopsis***:

Ishmael and Queeuqeg arrive at the wharf around 6am—Ishmael thinks he sees some shadowy sailors “running ahead” through the mist to board the Pequod, and he thinks the ship’s leaving—once again Elijah comes out of nowhere and starts nagging Ishmael and Queequeg—this time even Queequeg tells the ragged man to leave them alone: “go ‘way!”—Ishmael’s losing his cool as well: “Do you know, Mr. Elijah, that I consider you a little impertinent.”—[To Queequeg:] “He’s cracked.”—they try to leave, but Elijah detains them again, asks them if they saw the shadowy figures boarding the ship and tells them to find them again if they can—when they finally board the ship the make their way to the [forecastle](http://mysite.du.edu/~ttyler/ploughboy/whalingbarkbot.htm), where a rigger is sleeping—Ishmael’s still looking for the shadowy figures: “where could they have gone to?”—Queequeg and Ishmael enjoy a smoke over the rigger’s prostrate body—Queequeg sits on his butt and tells Ishmael about how people are used for furniture this way in Kokovoko—jokes about how easily he could kill the rigger with his tomahawk-pipe—”Perry easy, kill-e; oh! perry easy!”—Ishmael’s only half-amused—they exchange the pipe over the sleeping man until the forecastle is completely filled with smoke—the rigger wakes up, “Holloa! […] who be ye smokers?,” and gets back to work, citing the bustling efficiency of the first-mate, Starbuck—”Meanwhile Captain Ahab remained invisibly enshrined within his cabin.”

***Brief Analysis:***

When Queequeg uses a sleeping sailor as a sofa, Ishmael cries out, "[But] how hard he breathes, he's heaving himself; get off, Queequeg, you are heavy, it's grinding the face of the poor. Get off, Queequeg! Look, he'll twitch you off soon. I wonder he don't wake." This is an allusion to Isaiah 3:15: "What mean ye that ye beat my people to pieces, and grind the faces of the poor? saith the Lord God of hosts."

***Analysis(10 – 21):***

Contemplating Queequeg’s serene comportment, Ishmael develops a great respect for his new friend, noting that “[y]ou cannot hide the soul” under tattoos and appearances. Although Ishmael still thinks of Queequeg as a savage, the latter becomes, in Ishmael’s mind, “George Washington cannibalistically developed.” Ishmael makes some small gestures of friendship toward Queequeg, and the two become friendly. He admires Queequeg’s sincerity and lack of Christian “hollow courtesies.” According to the customs of Queequeg’s home, he and Queequeg are “married” after a social smoke out of the tomahawk pipe. Queequeg gives Ishmael half his belongings, and the two continue to share a bed, having many long chats. Ishmael even consents to join in Queequeg’s idol worship, explaining to his Christian readers that he is only obeying the Golden Rule, as he would hope the “savage” to join in Christian worship with him.

Approaching the Pequod at dawn, Ishmael thinks that he sees sailors boarding the ship and decides that the ship must be leaving at sunrise. Ishmael and Queequeg encounter Elijah again just before they board. Elijah asks Ishmael whether he saw “anything looking like men” boarding the ship; Ishmael replies that he did. The ship, however, is quiet save one old sailor, who informs them that the captain is already aboard. As the sun rises, the Pequod’s crew arrives and the ship prepares to sail.

In these chapters, a remarkably intense bond develops between Ishmael and Queequeg. Ishmael progresses from seeing Queequeg as a thing “hideously marred” about the face and body with tattoos to comparing Queequeg to George Washington. The two become “a cosy, loving pair” and exemplify an ideal friendship based on respect and sharing. The citizens of New Bedford, though used to seeing cannibals in their streets, are shocked by the pair’s closeness, and many of Ishmael’s comments about Queequeg are calculated to shock the nineteenth-century reader. Ishmael’s blithe acceptance and even embracing of Queequeg’s idolatry is a prime example of Melville’s attempt to provoke a reaction. Though he acknowledges that he is a Presbyterian, Ishmael refuses to insist on the correctness of his own religion, instead focusing on the unity of religions and the brotherhood of man.

Ishmael’s narrative continues to cast doubt on prejudice and dogma, both racial and religious. Ironically, Queequeg views his exposure to Christians as a contaminant that makes him unfit to rule his native people rather than a benefit or deliverance from ignorance. He disproves the prejudice of the Nantucket ferry’s passengers and captain by saving the ferry and the bumpkin who goes overboard, demonstrating that he is not a dangerous “devil.” His skill with a harpoon persuades Peleg and Bildad to ignore his religious practices and give him a berth on the Pequod. Though a Quaker, Peleg admits that religious principles are of little use at sea, where daring and attention to the tasks at hand are necessary for survival. There are limits, however, to Ishmael’s tolerance. Queequeg’s extreme abstinence during his “Ramadan” ritual provokes Ishmael to remonstrate with him—to no avail—about the folly of religious “dyspepsia,” referring to the malnourishment that he believes results from fasting.

These chapters are filled with foreshadowing and dark imagery. Elijah, who shares his name with the Old Testament prophet who foretold destruction to the biblical Ahab, tells Ishmael and Queequeg that the Pequod is doomed. Indeed, the ship itself is an emblem of death. Named after a tribe of New England Indians killed off by white settlers, it is covered in whale bones and teeth and cloaked in dark paint. Elijah’s fears seem to have some basis in fact, as he refers to incidents of bad judgment and unnecessary risk involving Ahab. Ahab himself, “desperate moody, and savage,” inspires sympathy, pity, and “a strange awe” in Ishmael. Named for the Israelite king who angers God with his worship of idols, Ahab seems an ominous figure. His obsession with the whale—a sort of perverse worship—has already injured him corporeally and spiritually, and we sense that the conflict will only heighten.

***Important Quotation Explained:***

How it is I know not; but there is no place like a bed for confidential disclosures between friends. Man and wife, they say, there open the very bottom of their souls to each other; and some old couples often lie and chat over old times till nearly morning. Thus, then, in our hearts’ honeymoon, lay I and Queequeg—a cosy, loving pair.

***Explanation:***

This passage comes at the end of Chapter 10, when Ishmael is forced to share a bed with the tattooed “savage” Queequeg at the Spouter-Inn. At first horrified, Ishmael is quickly impressed by Queequeg’s dignity and kindness. The homoerotic overtones of their sharing a bed and staying up much of the night smoking and talking suggests a profound, close bond born of mutual dependence and a world in which merit, rather than race or wealth, determines a man’s status. The men aboard the Pequod are everything to one another, and the relationships between them are stronger and more meaningful than even that between man and wife. Ishmael’s willingness to describe his relationship with Queequeg in such conjugal terms (“honeymoon”) symbolizes his openness to new experiences and people.

***Significance:***

“. . . hence I would have thought myself optically deceived in that matter, were it not for Elijah’s otherwise inexplicable question.”

“Going Aboard” plays a little bit like the first fifteen minutes of a horror movie (or Deliverance) — the kids pack up the van, drive into the woods somewhere, and ignore sign after sign of something being wrong about the situation. You really can’t blame the kids though — those signs of impending tragedy only stand out to the viewer because the viewer knows she’s watching a horror movie. In other words, events take on a new significance if you know the eventual outcome.

Ishmael and Queequeg clearly do not know the eventual outcome of shipping out on the Pequod, and so see little significance in the shadows of men vanishing mysteriously onto the ship, or Elijah’s cryptic warnings, or Queequeg’s tale of his country’s kings, who fatten up “the lower orders” to use as chairs and footstools. To Ishmael and Queequeg, the shadows are merely illusion, Elijah merely a crazy man, and Queequeg’s story in no way presages Ahab’s treatment of “the lower orders” on his ship. Perhaps this is what they mean when they say “hindsight is 20/20.”

“Going Aboard” creates an interesting kind of tension between the story and its reader, similar to that of horror movies. In a sick way, it can be almost fun to watch a character walk into his doom feeling that you, smartly, would not, even though, of course, you would.

***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) come back to the ship the next morning, before sunrise, and intend to board for their journey, which they have heard will start that day. As they are climbing aboard, [Elijah](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters) appears and stops them both, asking if they have seen the “four or five men” that just got on the vessel. Ishmael replies that he might have seen those men get on the boat, but he’s not concerned with them; when Elijah says that Ishmael will perhaps find out who those men are, later on, Ishmael wonders who these mysterious men could be. But he and Queequeg leave Elijah and board the vessel, not seeing the “four or five men” at all.

***Analysis Part 1:***

An important prophecy. Of course, these five men will become the five-person “tiger crew” of Ahab’s whale-boat. It is important to the captain that, like himself, they do not appear until the ship is long underway. Perhaps Ahab fears that this crew will be feared and loathed by other members of the Pequod—and in this, he is correct. Or perhaps he wants his “tiger crew” to be well-rested for the hunt for Moby Dick. But either way this subterfuge hints that the "fellowship" of the voyage, each sailor with his own share, is being undermined by the "tyrant" Ahab.

***Summary Part 2:***

[Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) and [Queequeg](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/queequeg) do see a light on below-decks, however, and go down to find a “rigger” (a man rigging the boat for its journey) asleep there. Queequeg sits on the man’s rear end (a custom in his country, he explains to Ishmael), and the two men share the tomahawk-pipe as the rigger sleeps. Finally, the rigger stirs and asks if Ishmael and Queequeg will be sailing on the Pequod. They say they will, and they go up above-decks with the rigger, hearing that [Starbuck](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/starbuck), the ship’s chief mate, is there, and that [Ahab](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ahab) is still secluded in his cabin on the ship—no one has yet seen him.

***Analysis Part 2:***

Another important and ancillary point, related to the preparations of the Pequod, are the sheer number of specialized jobs available for men aboard a whale-ship. Here, the “rigger”’s primary task is simply to put the boat in shape for the beginning of its journey; later, while on the open seas, the members of the crew will be asked to maintain this order. The rigger is joined by the likes of the ship’s carpenter, its blacksmith, and its cook, all of whom will appear later. Men's roles define them on a ship, just as they do in society.