***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 23 –The Lee Shore***

***Summary:***

* Ishmael reminds the reader about the man he saw in the inn at New Bedford named Bulkington (you remember, the least rowdy Grampus crew member, way back in New Bedford?).
* Now he looks upon the *Pequod* and sees a vision of Bulkington at the helm.
* He’s amazed that a man who just came back from a four-year voyage would immediately set off on another voyage for three years.
* Ishmael explains: "this six-inch chapter is the stoneless grave of Bulkington" (23.2). Bulkington’s not dead, but we’re not going to hear any more about him in the novel.
* Ishmael uses Bulkington as a means to think about the safety of port and land versus the thrilling danger of landlessness, and then dismisses Bulkington forever.

***Synopsis***:

Ishmael offers a brief portrait of Bulkington, a sailor whom he first meets in New Bedford. Ishmael watches Bulkington steer the Pequod and thinks of him as a restless pioneer, fated to die at sea. Ishmael considers this kind of death infinitely preferable to fading away through cowardice, and, in an imaginary address to Bulkington, declares that the death at sea will transform Bulkington into a god.

***Brief Analysis(Ch 21-23):***

The Pequod is scheduled to sail on Christmas Day. In the gray pre-dawn mist, Queequeg and Ishmael approach the ship and think they see some figures boarding ahead of them. Elijah suddenly appears close behind and asks whether they have seen anyone going aboard. Ishmael says he thinks he saw four or five men, and Elijah challenges him to find them on the ship. Ishmael cannot. Nor is Ahab to be seen, though Ishmael is told by a sailor that the captain entered the vessel during the night. Peleg and Bildad help set the ship to sail and reluctantly return to land.

The aura of mystery surrounding the Pequod is enhanced by Ahab's absence and the unidentifiable figures who seem to be boarding the ship before dawn. Elijah toys with Ishmael through his cryptic statements, first insisting on a conversation and then offering only hints of his meaning. Typical is his farewell: "I was going to warn ye against — but never mind, never mind . . . . Shan't see ye again very soon, I guess; unless it's before the Grand Jury," an apparent suggestion of possible murder or mutiny during the voyage. Like the biblical Elijah, a prophet of the truth, Moby-Dick's Elijah also speaks the truth, but in such a cryptic way that Ishmael, and the reader, is left to wonder at his meaning. Ishmael's uncertainty increases the more he knows, or doesn't know, about the trip. As a sensitive observer, he is aware of the unusual circumstances but still determined to have his whaling adventure.

The mood is lightened by the appearance of Peleg and Bildad, two old salts who act as if they would love to stay with the ship but have other responsibilities, most likely profitable ones, on land. Starbuck, the first mate, is briefly introduced and seems a steadying influence as he competently takes charge of the voyage in Ahab's absence.

Glossary

scuttle here, a small, covered opening or hatchway in the outer hull or deck of a ship.

aft near or toward the stern (rear) of a ship.

mainyard the lowest rod or spar on the mainmast, from which the mainsail is set.

intrepid bold, fearless.

apotheosis deification or glorification of a person or thing.

Lee Shore the leeward, downwind, sheltered, or protected shore.

***Analysis:***

When the Pequod thrusts into the waves, Ishmael sees [Bulkington](https://www.gradesaver.com/moby-dick/study-guide/character-list" \l "bulkington), a dangerous man just landed from a four years' dangerous voyage whom he had seen at the Coffin inn. The land seems "scorching" to Bulkington's feet, and Ishmael begins to think about how "in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God," and thus it is better to die at sea than on land.

Both this and the previous chapter posit the idea that a certain class of persons exist who operate better on the sea than on land, as shown by Bildad and Peleg, both regretful that they must leave the Pequod for shore, and Bulkington, who seemed unnatural when Ishmael saw him on land at the Coffin inn. Ishmael attributes this to a certain psychological attainment, claiming that truth belongs at sea for its indefinite quality and flexibility. For Melville, the sea represents a degree of mystery and abstraction compared to the more definite atmosphere of dry land.

***Significance(Ch20-23):***

A flurry of activity occurs to get the *Pequod* ready to sail. Ropes and canvas are brought on board as well as bedding, food supplies and equipment for eating, and spare parts of every kind needed for a three-year voyage. During these preparations, [Captain Ahab](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Captain_Ahab) is nowhere to be seen. Bildad and Peleg say that he is not well but is expected any time. [Ishmael](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Ishmael) finds this suspicious but knows he has already committed to the voyage.

It is early morning when Ishmael and [Queequeg](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/" \l "Queequeg) arrive at the *Pequod* the day they are to depart in Chapter 21. As they hurry toward the ship, Elijah again confronts them with questions. He asks them if they've seen some men going toward the ship. When Ishmael replies *yes*, Elijah says, "See if you can find 'em now." Then he leaves. When Ishmael and Queequeg board the *Pequod*, Ishmael wonders where the men he saw have gone. As the final preparations for the voyage are made, Ahab remains "invisibly enshrined" in his cabin.

As Chapter 22 begins, it is about noon and the *Pequod* is ready to get underway. Captain Bildad and Captain Peleg, along with Mr. [Starbuck](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Starbuck), the first mate, are overseeing things because Captain Ahab is still holed up in his cabin. Ishmael continues to find Ahab's absence disconcerting. Once the *Pequod* is well underway, the two old captains depart onto another boat that will take them back to shore.

In Chapter 23, Ishmael notices that the pilot of the ship is a man named Bulkington, who has just returned from a four-year voyage. Ishmael devotes this short chapter to Bulkington who lives his life on the seas, saying "in landlessness alone resides highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God."

This section reveals a comical difference between Captain Peleg and Captain Bildad, which was glimpsed before in the interactions among the two captains and [Queequeg](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/" \l "Queequeg). When Queequeg signed on to the ship, Bildad piously tried to encourage him to convert to Christianity. Here again, the reader can see that Bildad is the more religious of the two business partners. Throughout the ordeal of setting out, Bildad is "imperturbable" and sings religious songs, while Peleg shouts and kicks the sailors to get them to work faster. Clearly, Peleg is the less religious, or perhaps the more practical, of the two Quakers.

The suspense created by the missing [Captain Ahab](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Captain_Ahab) intensifies as the *Pequod* gets underway. All manner of excuses are made for Ahab's absence—he's ill; he's recovering; he's expected very soon; he's not really needed anyway. Captain Bildad and Captain Peleg disembark, but still Ahab is nowhere to be seen. [Starbuck](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Starbuck) takes charge instead. As if that weren't enough, the mysterious Elijah makes another appearance, this time to draw the attention of [Ishmael](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Ishmael) and Queequeg to the strange men who seem to board the ship and then vanish into thin air.

As the ship begins its voyage, Ishmael's meditation on life at sea, prompted by the character Bulkington, may seem out of place in a section of the text that contains so much action. But it is important to remember that Ahab's monomaniacal obsession hinges on trying to master something God has deemed too powerful for humans to vanquish, or even comprehend. While the White Whale symbolizes this in a more personal way, the sea—"indefinite as God"—does as well.

***Important Quotations Explained:***

“The Lee Shore” is a weirdly beautiful chapter of Moby Dick.  There’s a man named Bulkington that Ishmael meets early in the book (Ch 2-ish), and we hear nothing more of him until Ch 23 when he falls overboard and dies.  In a very short (“6 in.”) chapter, Melville manages to pack in a lot of very important and very recurring extended metaphors: 1) there’s definitely a land/ocean dichotomy throughout the book that takes on various forms in various chapters (sanity/madness, conservatism/progressivism, status quo/revolution (or paradigm shift)), 2) throughout the book we often see voyages to sea being presented as the physical equivalent of deep, ponderous soul-searching.  “The Lee Shore” refers to a ship’s habit of staying within sight of the shore when possible because solid ground is safe.  But nothing, says Ishmael, is more dangerous than hugging to the lee shore in turbulent weather — one is more likely dashed against the rocks at shore than whelmed in the middle of the ocean.  Push out then, Ishmael advises, into freedom of thought and being when the going gets rough.  You can connect the spiritual dots from here.

Distilled to a pop song, I think this is all a way of saying enjoy the fair weather but let it go when you need to.  Don’t be tethered by the familiar — if you find yourself in turbulent times, the familiar is obviously not working out for you. If you have been reading along, some of this will sound a lot like what we hear from Ishmael in “Loomings.” Anyway, how better to enjoy good times than to dance?  How better to dance than to dance “The Lee Shore”?

Toward noon the riggers are dismissed and the Pequod sets sail—Captains Bildad and Peleg lead the ship out of port—they “were going it with a high hand on the [quarterdeck](http://patell.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/whaler_deck-620x388.jpg), just as if they were to be joint-commanders at sea”—still no sign of Captain Ahab, but he’s given the order to set sail—Ishmael still thinks it’s odd but not unheard of that Ahab would remain below deck while getting the ship under weigh—Peleg springs into action and begins shouting commands to the crew like a crazed man—”he seemed to do most of the talking and commanding, and not Bildad”—orders that the tent be struck (taken down), which order is “the next thing to heaving up the anchor”— Bildad sits back, “as pilot,” singing a strain of psalmody hearkening to warmer times in the midst of the freezing Christmas cast-off—he has declared “no profane songs” be allowed especially when first setting out—his sister, Charity, has placed [“a small choice copy of Watts in every seaman’s berth”](https://chasingflukes.com/reading_guide-overview/glossary/22watts/)—Ishmael is working feverishly, when Peleg comes booming by and gives him a [#kick](https://chasingflukes.com/reading_guide-overview/chapter_summaries-home/chapter-summaries-part1/#kick) on his backside—“Is that the way they heave in the merchant service?”—With Peleg running all over the ship in “the most frightful manner” (“Captain Peleg,” thinks Ishmael, “must have been drinking something to-day.”), Ishmael’s last comfort is Bildad’s singing, “spite of his seven hundred and seventy-seventh lay”—[*Sweet fields beyond the sweeling flood, / Stand dressed in living green…*](https://chasingflukes.com/reading_guide-overview/glossary/22watts/)—the chapter closes with the reluctant departure from the *Pequod* of Captains Bildad and Peleg, who head back to Nantucket—Bildad seems to barely be able to stand leaving; Peleg takes it “more like a philosopher,” “but for all his philosophy, there was a tear twinkling in his eye”—Peleg wishes everyone luck; Bildad gives last minute instructions, re: the boats, sail needles, the butter, and don’t kill whales on the Sabbath unless it’s “a fair chance”—Ishmael is now under the care of the unseen Captain—a transition from the safety of land and structured guidance of Captain Bildad to the uncertain openness of the sea and Ahab—”we gave three heavy-hearted cheers, and blindly plunged like fate into the lone Atlantic.”

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

***Summary Part 1:***

In this short chapter, [Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) addresses the reader and points out that the man at the helm of the Pequod, as it first left shore, was [Bulkington](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/bulkington), under orders from Starbuck—the same Bulkington who was referred to in adulatory tones in the Spouter Inn in New Bedford. Ishmael tells the reader that Bulkington goes down with the Pequod at the end of the tale—an early reference to the ship’s demise—and that boats and human souls seem designed for adventure, even when those adventures end in death and destruction. Ishmael states that “the highest truth” is “shoreless and indefinite,” like God—that man must seek for this highest truth out in the waves, in the terror of the unknown. And he leaves this chapter as a “six-inch stoneless grave” to Bulkington, brave pilot of the doomed vessel.

***Analysis Part 1:***

In one of the novel’s stranger passages, Ishmael sings the praises of the man, Bulkington, whom he mentioned very briefly in an early chapter regarding the Spouter Inn. Critical theories abound about Bulkington: some critics contend that he was to have a larger part in the narrative, but Melville simply forgot about him. Others claim that Bulkington is a symbol of the many crewmembers of the Pequod whose stories were not told in the novel—who were simply subsumed into the hunt for Moby Dick, and whose lives could form the basis for other books not yet written. In any event, Bulkington is to remain a mystery in the novel—never fully explained or characterized.