***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 4 –The Counterpane***

***Summary:***

When Queequeg and Ishmael wake up the next morning, Queequeg’s arm lies affectionately thrown over Ishmael, as if the latter were “his wife.” Ishmael watches the cannibal don a fancy hat and boots and shave himself with his harpoon. He marvels at the “savage’s understanding of civilized manners.”

***Detailed Summary:***

* Ishmael wakes up with Queequeg’s arm around him in bed. Awww.
* The patchwork quilt and Queequeg’s tattooed arm blend together strangely.
* Ishmael tells us something that happened to him when he was a child. Here’s the story:
* Young Ishmael has done something naughty and his stepmother sends him to bed, even though it’s only two in the afternoon on the summer solstice (which is, by definition, the longest day of the year).
* Young Ishmael lies there, thinking that he’ll have to stay in bed for another sixteen hours before he can get up again. He’s bored and feels terrible.
* Eventually, Young Ishmael gets up and begs his stepmother to punish him in any way other than making him stay in bed. She cruelly sends him back.
* Young Ishmael lies in bed, feeling awful. Eventually he sleeps for a bit, and then he suddenly wakes in the dark.
* His arm is hanging down by the side of the bed, and he thinks for a moment that he feels a supernatural hand in his. He can’t move.
* This concludes Young Ishmael’s account.
* Old, or Present Ishmael wonders about this strange event for a long time.
* He compares it, minus the fear, to waking up and feeling Queequeg’s arm around him.
* Now things go from scary to slapstick: Queequeg is still asleep, his grip is really strong, and Ishmael can’t wake him up, so he’s just lying there, trapped under the man’s arm.
* Eventually, by wriggling around and shouting, Ishmael wakes up his bedfellow.
* Queequeg and Ishmael stare at each other for a bit.
* Queequeg is "stiff as a pike-staff," (nudge, nudge).
* Queequeg gets out of bed and indicates that he’ll get dressed first and then leave and let Ishmael get dressed in private.
* Ishmael’s grateful for his politeness, but doesn’t behave with such delicacy himself: he stares at Queequeg practically without blinking while the harpooneer gets dressed.
* Queequeg getting dressed is like one of those Sesame Street segments where they teach you how to put on your pajamas if you don’t know how: he puts his hat on first, then gets under the bed to put his boots on in private, even though he still doesn’t have his pants on.
* Queequeg’s "civilized" enough to know that some clothes should be put on in private, but not which ones.
* Ishmael has to beg Queequeg to put his pants on, because people in the house next door can see in through the window.
* Queequeg washes his chest, arms, and hands, but not his face, and then shaves using his harpoon. Queequeg then "proudly marche[s] out of the room" (4.7).

***Brief Summary:***

Queequeg and Ishmael wake up spooning—Queequeg’s arm, because tattooing and various hues of sun tan from many voyages at sea, appears to blend with the patchwork quilt (aka, [counterpane](http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-Jj6kLmmnmn4/Tb6uCa2pg0I/AAAAAAAAAqc/PoMqg89tgic/s1600/DSC_0001_2.JPG))—Ishmael’s “sensations [are] strange”; he’s reminded of a childhood memory—he was scolded by his stepmother, “who, somehow or other, was all the time whipping [him] or sending [him] to bed supperless” (#orphan?), for trying to crawl up the chimney like he’d seen a chimney-sweep  do—as punishment he was sent to bed at two o’clock in the afternoon on June 21—gets in bed contemplating the eternal-seeming 16 hours that have to pass before he can leave his room—awoke from “troubled nightmare of a doze,” his arm hanging down from the bed; it felt like a phantom hand was holding onto it—now, “take away the awful fear” he experienced as a child, and this is the same sensation he experiences waking up beneath Queequeg’s arm—Ishmael can’t move—turns himself to discover the tomahawk-pipe is in bed with them, “as if it were a hatchet-faced baby”—finally manages to rouse Queequeg by yelling at him—After Queequeg remembers who Ishmael is, he gets out of bed and dresses by putting his hat and boots on first while Ishmael stares—Queequeg gets under the bed to put on his boots! (what’s that about?)—Ishmael tells him to put pants on because the people in the building across the street can see—Queequeg washes everything but his face—shaves with his harpoon—proudly marches out of the room, “sporting his harpoon like a marshal’s baton.”

***Critical Analysis:***

Ishmael awakes to find Queequeg's arm thrown over him in an affectionate manner. Ishmael finally awakens Queequeg, who dresses by first putting on his hat and his boots. Queequeg is a creature in a transition state, "neither caterpillar nor butterfly . . . just enough civilized to show off his outlandishness in the strangest possible manner." Queequeg washes himself, but only his chest and arms and not his face.

Melville portrays the relationship between Queequeg and Ishmael as a perverse romance, placing the two men in bed together and even sleeping with one another in an affectionate manner. The intent of this is not to serious suggest homoeroticism, but rather to demonstrate that the patterns of behavior demonstrated by Queequeg are unconventional, as when he dresses himself by first putting on his boots. The comparison of Queequeg to a creature in the state of metamorphosis is apt, showing him to be a person in the state of transition, neither entirely part of a savage world nor fully accepted and integrated into civilized society.

***Critical Study:***

Moby-Dick is in some ways like a bunch of smaller books — Ishmael’s Moody Journey of Discovery, A Pocket Guide to the Whale Fishery, A Treatise on Whiteness, Ishmael and Queequeg Find a Friend — all crammed together into one super awesome book. Unlike Infinite Jest-esque post-modern behemoths, these stories are much more compartmentalized than interwoven threads around a theme. Without warning or necessity, the book drops characters, relationships, and stories with the turn of a single page — sometimes you get them back, and sometimes you don’t. One of the most endearing and lamentably dropped stories early on is the budding friendship of Queequeg and Ishmael. We have an intense period with the pair starting with Ishmael’s long and tense wait for his dark, pagan bedfellow-by-necessity in “The Spouter-Inn” (Chapter 3), and dropping off with the ship’s departure somewhere around “Merry Christmas” (Chapter 22). From there, both Ishmael and Queequeg all but disappear until the final chapters of the book.

Ishmael and Queequeg are brought together by a lack of available beds at The Spouter-Inn. Peter Coffin, rascal that he his, pairs the two up with hilarious and touching results. The two men have a lot of bridges to build — religion, race, personal space/boundaries, the disparate patterns of disparate cultural upbringings — and watching the push and pull of these negotiations of friendship is a slice of light and joy and (strangely) hope through an often dark and bleak book. Awesome as the rest of the book is, that was a little hard for me to let go of my first time through.

“The Counterpane” is also an excellent example of Melville’s regular practice of talking about one thing while really talking about another. There is certainly a counterpane (patchwork quilt) on the bed that umbrellas Ishmael and Queequeg as they sleep (and later, just hang around and smoke), but the real counterpane in this chapter is Queequeg himself.  Queequeg’s tattooed body is a sort of patchwork quilt in appearance. We later find that his tattoos are a written narrative of the universe and “a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth,” though no one save the prophet who inscribed them can decipher their meaning, not even Queequeg.  Queequeg’s skin is a text of heritage, history and culture layered over the text of his race.

“The Counterpane” begins the morning after Ishmael and Queequeg spend their first night together as bedfellows. Ishmael wakes to find Queequeg hugging him “in the most loving and affectionate manner.” Ishmael is immediately reminded of a moment from his childhood involving lots of references to light and dark. He is trying to climb into the dark, sooty chimney (ala William Blake) when he is caught by his evil stepmother. As punishment, he has to spend the remainder of the day in bed. Being the lightest day of the year, summer solstice, this is quite a stretch of time, but beg as he might, his stepmother insists. He eventually falls asleep and wakes, “and the before sun-lit room was now wrapped in outer darkness.” Worse still, Ishmael finds himself hand in hand with a dark phantom:

For what seemed ages piled on ages, I lay there, frozen with the most awful fears, not daring to drag away my hand; yet ever thinking that if I could but stir it one single inch, the horrid spell would be broken.

But Ishmael doesn’t want the spell to be broken, either with the phantom limb or with Queequeg. He submits himself to the embrace of the Other and I think finds a synthesis in the resulting friendship. Ishmael and Queequeg are sewn into the larger community of the crew and into the larger narrative of the Pequod. Counterpanes nested within counterpanes.

***Significance (Ch3-4):***

Ishmael enters the Spouter Inn and is disappointed to find there are no empty rooms. If he wishes to stay there, he must either sleep on a bench in the dining hall or share a bed with a harpooner. Disturbed by the idea of sharing another man's bed, Ishmael tries to make the bench work, but cold drafts and the inadequate size of the bench make that arrangement impossible.

The landlord again offers Ishmael the option of sharing the harpooner's room. The landlord has a bit of fun at Ishmael's expense when describing the harpooner and takes great pleasure in informing Ishmael the savage man is out selling heads and probably won't be in all night. Despite this information, Ishmael decides to share the room. As Ishmael tries to sleep, the harpooner, known as Queequeg, comes back from his night of head selling. As Ishmael watches, Queequeg performs a sort of heathen religious ritual, and then hops into bed, along with his tomahawk.

Startled at finding a strange man in his bed, Queequeg swings his tomahawk and threatens to kill Ishmael. Ishmael calls for the landlord, who quickly clears up the confusion and turmoil. Ishmael can tell that even at this point, the landlord still finds humor in the unfortunate circumstances. With the confusion cleared up, Queequeg politely offers Ishmael a spot in the bed and after the tomahawk is stashed safely out of the bed, Ishmael complies and sleeps peacefully.

Ishmael wakes from his sleep with Queequeg's arm wrapped around him in what is described as a matrimonial fashion. Ishmael describes how this tattooed arm blends in perfectly with the patchwork quilt on the bed. He then tries to struggle out from under the savage's grip. In his struggling, Ishmael finally manages to wake Queequeg who insists he dress first, and then leave the room for Ishmael to dress in private. This being decided, Ishmael watches Queequeg's unusual manner of dressing which includes crawling under the bed to put on his boots and then shaving his face with his harpoon.

Ishmael leaves his depressive tone behind when he enters the Spouter Inn. Once inside the inn, Ishmael returns to his jovial demeanor as he describes the interior of the inn and the people he meets there. Ishmael is unusually interested in a picture hanging in the entry of the inn. This picture is of a non-descript mass, which Ishmael decides to try to interpret.

Perhaps the most interesting part of this chapter is Ishmael's first encounter with Queequeg, the harpooner with whom he shares a room. Ishmael describes the man's odd clothing, tattooed skin and topknot of hair. In the tradition of American romanticism, Ishmael chooses to look beyond the man's appearance and decides he must be good at heart.

Here, the novel's theme of the differences in races and cultures is introduced. Upon waking, Queequeg offers to dress first and allow Ishmael to dress in private, an offer quite polite for a "savage." Despite his polite American nature, however, Ishmael finds himself staring at Queequeg in a most impolite way as Queequeg goes about his unusual morning routine. The unusual features of Queequeg's routine are used to bring out the differences in the pair's cultures. For instance, Ishmael thinks it is barbaric the way Queequeg feels he must hide under the bed to put on his boots, but feels comfortable walking about the room, which can be easily viewed from the room across the street, with no clothes on.

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

***Summary Part 1:***

[Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) wakes the next morning, and finds that [Queequeg](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/queequeg) has “draped his arm” across him in a “most affectionate manner.” Ishmael also sees that the tattoos on Queequeg’s arm are almost indistinguishable from the patchwork pattern on the “counterpane,” or bedspread. Ishmael remarks that the experience of Queequeg holding him in the morning reminds him of another time, long ago, as a child, when his stepmother sent him to bed early. The young Ishmael awoke by himself in his old house, in the middle of the night, and, still half in a dream, thought that “another hand” lay clasping his—a hand as from a dream, or a “phantom.” Ishmael is reminded of this scene, now, in the Spouter Inn, because Queequeg’s hand exerts the same pressure on Ishmael’s as did that phantom hand long ago.

***Analysis Part 1:***

A very famous instance in the novel, and one that has prompted a great deal of scholarly debate as regards the nature of Ishmael and Queequeg’s intimacy. On the one hand, to a contemporary reader, it seems that Ishmael might be hinting, somewhat coyly, at the possibility of a sexual relationship between the two, or at least at the reality of homosexual male desire. But other critics contend that Melville is merely reinforcing the brotherly bond between these sailors, and that their physical intimacy was common at the time. It is also possible that Melville intended both readings.

***Summary Part 2:***

But [Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) shakes off the vision, and rouses [Queequeg](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/queequeg), who begins to dress (and who, courteously, says to Ishmael in their shared language that he will dress first, allowing Ishmael the room “to himself” afterward). Queequeg puts his boots on under the bed, washes his body but not his face, and uses his harpoon, which he has also brought into the room, to shave his face. Ishmael marvels at these preparations, and says he has never seen anything like it. Ishmael also believes that Queequeg is “in transition” from cannibalism, or savagery, into “civilized” behavior—thus explaining the strangeness of his dressing routine.

***Analysis Part 2:***

Another famous scene in the novel. Queequeg shaving with his harpoon is exactly the kind of thing a man who is “half-savage, half-civilized” might do. Ishmael, for his part, does not appear to recognize the parts of his own character that are perhaps “less civilized”—the fact that he has no money, and that he does not always understand the manners and humor of the men with whom he interacts. But Queequeg is obviously “foreign,” and therefore Ishmael feels comfortably laughing quietly at his strange morning routine.