***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 6 –The Street***

***Summary:***

Ishmael wanders about New Bedford, marveling at the town and its people. Because of the maritime industry centered here, the town is full of men from all corners of the globe, from the South Pacific to the remote mountains of Vermont. The great mansions and finely dressed women of the town all exist thanks to the high prices that whale oil commands

***Detailed Summary:***

* Ishmael wanders through the streets of New Bedford, looking at all the unusual foreign-looking people near the docks.
* There are lots of South Sea Islanders.
* Ishmael thinks about the way that docks everywhere always have the most surprising people in any country—and how, in India, it’s the American Yankees who are the weird foreigners. A little bit of cultural relativism for you, there.
* Even more amusing than the foreign traders, to Ishmael, are the naive country folks from Vermont and New Hampshire, who are in New Bedford trying to make their fortunes.
* Lots of these rural folks are decked out in ridiculous clothing that they think is the last word in whaling high fashion.
* Ishmael notes that all of New Bedford’s wealth comes from the whaling industry; that’s what made this place a nice little town instead of just a bit of scrub on the Massachusetts shore.
* Even the women in New Bedford, according to Ishmael, are the most beautiful in America. Of course, we haven’t seen any women in the novel yet, and Ishmael doesn’t seem all that interested anyway.

***Brief Summary:***

During his first daylight stroll through New Bedford, Ishmael sees around the docks the queerest looking nondescripts from foreign parts. In New Bedford, fathers reportedly give whales for dowers to their daughters, and portion off their nieces with a few porpoises a piece.

This chapter is significant primarily in order to establish the predominance of whaling in the New Bedford community, in which the whales are considered prizes significant enough to be a dowry. Melville also establishes New Bedford as a microcosm of society in which all races and classes are present, thus suggesting a larger applicability of the story outside of its more specific locale.

***Critical Analysis(Ch5-6):***

Ishmael describes the rather uneventful morning breakfast with the boarders of the Spouter Inn. While Ishmael expects to hear some lively stories about whale hunting, he is instead met by an embarrassed and silent group of burly men. During the breakfast scene, Ishmael takes note of the manners and appearances of the other men at the table. Queequeg is of special interest as he uses his harpoon to snag breakfast foods from over the heads of others.

In this chapter, Ishmael describes the variety of people he meets on the streets of New Bedford. Ishmael soon loses his astonishment at Queequeg's oddities as he sees other people on the streets who are just as unusual and savage in appearance as Queequeg. Ishmael sees some people who are obviously well familiar with the whaling business. He also sees others on the streets who are newcomers to whaling, as seen by their lack of knowledge concerning how they should properly dress and what weapons they should carry on a whaling mission. Ishmael also notes the richness of some parts of town and credits this wealth to the whaling industry.

During both the breakfast and street scenes, Ishmael takes note of the differences in the men with whom he shares a table and those he meets on the streets. Ishmael points out the distinct differences between the working class people and those who own or make a great amount of profit from the whaling industry. The tone of this section of the novel is generally upbeat with an air of surprise which comes from all of the "odd" people Ishmael meets as he tours the town.

***Significance :***

As my wife wades through an exceptionally long book about Reconstruction, I have heard a good deal over meals about nineteenth century idealizing of free labor and mercantilism. While struggling to make sense of “The Street,” I decided to use those principles as a lens: the chapter is a hyperbolized, satirical vision of the benefits of free labor, touting New Bedford as a marvel of race- and class-shattering opportunity. In New Bedford, whaling enterprises bring together not only sailors of the wide world, but inland dwellers as well, “who have felled forests, and now seek to drop the axe and snatch the whale-lance.” We also see absurdly foppish country dandies, overdressed for the work to come, having romanticized the sea into notions of easy money. Ishmael presents New Bedford as a land of plenty, not fertile for crops, but fertile for business, transforming a “bony” and “howling” landscape into a paradise of civilization.

It’s all a little over-the-top, and I’m left with a sense that although free market ideals were in some ways liberal, democratizing concepts at the time, forward thinkers saw in these ideals the seeds of exploitation and fraud that have come to plague our world ever since. In the end, only the few live in New Bedford’s “patrician-like houses” or enjoy New Bedford’s “opulent” gardens, and the rest simply exist in a pleasure dome of smoke and mirrors — dangerous cannibals, fancy clothes, endless oil, manly posturing, and musky women. A whaler’s life for me!

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

***Summary Part 1:***

[Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) goes out for a “stroll” in the streets of New Bedford, and remarks that there, as in New York, Philadelphia, and other port towns, one might find a good number of “exotic” individuals not unlike Queequeg—men from islands in the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, who have joined the whaling trade and therefore walk around the port towns between voyages. Ishmael also notes that young boys arrive in New Bedford from inland places, like the Green Mountains in Vermont, looking “green” (or inexperienced) themselves, and hoping for great adventures aboard whaling ships. Ishmael ends the chapter by stating that New Bedford’s primary industry is whaling, and that the many fine houses there—and well-dressed young women—are attributable to the riches of the whaling trade.

***Analysis Part 1:***

“Exotic,” for Ishmael, can mean either domestic or international, depending on the context. Although Americans from Vermont are not going to a foreign country when they come to New Bedford, they are nevertheless about to embark on a lifestyle completely different from that in which they were raised. Whereas someone like Queequeg, who comes from the far-away Pacific isles, has spent his entire life around water, and seems to be less afraid of living for long periods on a ship, and plying his trade on the sea. Ishmael's depiction of the interactions of these cultures around shipping and whaling cities again emphasizes the sense that there is a fundamental connectedness between people beneath their differences.