***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 7 –The Chapel***

***Summary:***

Ishmael finds the Whaleman’s Chapel, which contains plaques commemorating those lost or killed at sea. He ponders the contradictory message inherent in the chapel: if heaven really is a better place, it doesn’t make sense for a dead man’s friends and relatives to mourn him so inconsolably. Ishmael is surprised to find Queequeg in the chapel.

***Detailed Summary:***

* After his walk, Ishmael goes back to the inn to get a heavy coat, because a storm has set in. Then, he goes to a local "Whaleman’s Chapel," which most sailors visit before they embark on a voyage.
* When Ishmael enters the chapel, he finds a group of "sailors, and sailors’ wives and widows" (7.2) sitting silently, each of them lost in their own thoughts.
* They all seem to be reading the different plaques on the walls—memorials to men who died at sea.
* Ishmael is surprised to find that Queequeg is also in the chapel.
* Queequeg is the only person who reacts to Ishmael’s entrance, because he’s the only one not reading the plaques. (He can’t.)
* Ishmael muses on how difficult it is to lose a loved one to the sea: without finding the person’s body, his friends and relatives never really get closure, and will always wonder if he’s really dead.
* Even if he is dead, Ishmael finds it strange that nobody is comforted by the fact that he should be having a good time in the afterlife. This is a chapel after all—you’d think heaven would be more of a topic than it seems to be.
* Ishmael, however, doesn’t get depressed: he thinks to himself that people keep obsessing over mortality, but that the body is much less important than the soul.

***Brief Summary:***

In New Bedford there is a Whaleman's Chapel, where a scattered and silent congregation worships. There are numerous memorials to whalemen lost at sea. Queequeg has a gaze of incredulous curiosity in this chapel, and is the only one to notice Ishmael's entrance into the chapel. Ishmael regards these memorials with deep feelings, knowing that the same fate may be his own, but he somehow grows merry again. There is death in the business of whaling, but he thinks that we have mistaken the matter of Life and Death, and that persons are like oysters observing the sun, thinking the thickest water to be the thinnest of air.

The Whaleman's Chapel serves as yet another reminder of the high mortality rate at sea, foreshadowing the inevitable hardship that will ensue. Whaling takes on a greater significance in this chapter, representing matters of human mortality and the afterlife. The analogy that Melville uses to show the mistaken human perspective on mortality is significant, for he uses the perspective of the ocean and of the whale to show the errors in human thought.

***Critical Analysis(4-7):***

Ishmael awakens first on Sunday morning and has time to observe the various tattoos on Queequeg's huge arm and face. The narrator wonders what sort of pagan he has for a bunkmate. When the harpooner finally stirs, however, he is thoughtful and kind, dressing first and leaving the room so Ishmael can have some privacy. After breakfast, Ishmael walks about New Bedford, winding up at Whaleman's Chapel where he notices numerous memorial tablets honoring men who died at sea. Ishmael thinks about death and immortality. He is a little surprised to see Queequeg in the congregation.

Under Queequeg's influence, Ishmael is opening his mind to the nature of mankind and the values to be found, if we bother to look, in people from diverse backgrounds. Initially frightened by the strange harpooner, the narrator is beginning to think of him as a friend, a more civilized man than most despite Queequeg's penchant for shaving with his harpoon and spearing the rarest steak for himself at breakfast — acts others might find barbaric even for a whaler. ("Civilized" folk in New England ate their meat well done in Melville's time and usually waited for the platter to pass.) The port city offers Ishmael more opportunities to observe people from other cultures: sailors from around the world, country dwellers, even real cannibals. He is beginning to enjoy the diversity of this world.

Ishmael and Queequeg's developing relationship is important to the allegorical concepts in the work. Initially, for example, Ishmael and Queequeg are perceived — by themselves and others — to be complete opposites: one civilized; the other a barbarian. Even the fact that Queequeg is dark and painted and Ishmael is fair seems to highlight this "oppositeness." And, in truth, the two men are opposites — in every way but the soul: If we scratch away the superficial descriptors, we see that each men is, essentially, like the other. Both are tolerant, both are decent. Both are forever helpful, and both are gentle people in an essentially brutal environment. Ishmael and Queequeg are universal characters that portray the best in man, and, as is made apparent later, they possess characteristics that Ahab lacks. Most significantly, Ishmael and Queequeg feel a love and responsibility for each other, and this is never more apparent than when Queequeg "saves" Ishmael at the end of the tale. Ahab, we will come to learn, has no connection to any other person or thing beyond the White Whale. Furthermore, he is willing to sacrifice anything (the Pequod, the profits from the successful hunts, his duty to the ship owners and his crew) and anybody, including the lives of every man aboard his vessel, for revenge.

At the chapel, Ishmael's thoughts turn to death and the question of what is important about life — what, if anything, survives after death. Because this little church primarily serves whalers, it prominently displays a number of memorial tablets honoring men killed at sea. Ishmael considers his own mortality and wonders if he will meet the fate of these men. His spirits rise, however, when he concludes that his physical self is not the real Ishmael at all. It is a shadow; and his shadow, his spirit, is his true substance. He concludes that we humans are like oysters at the bottom of the sea, limited in our view of reality. We are confused about what is important. In that frame of mind, he awaits the sermon.

Glossary

counterpane an embroidered quilt, here compared to Queequeg's tattooed skin.

labyrinth an intricate network of winding passages, a maze.

ablutions washing of the body, often ritualistic.

eschewed avoided, shunned.

bumpkin an awkward or simple person from the country.

spermaceti a white, waxlike substance taken from the oil in the head of a sperm whale, used to make candles, cosmetics, or ointments.

***Significance :***

Imagine you live in 1850 — no internet, no telephone, only the earliest telegraph lines beginning to crisscross the landscape. Most long-distance communication travels in letters, by horse, by train, or by boat. Transportation is slow and expensive. If your best friend moves to a remote Pacific island, that’s most likely the last you’ll ever see or hear of him. In other words, imagine that your friend takes a journey that leaves him, effectively, dead to you. Would his departure on this journey be less sad for you than his actual death? Why? Perhaps you find comfort in some small possibility of being reunited in the future. What, then, of a journey your friend takes to an eternal paradise, a paradise in which you will certainly meet again? Does grievance, for a Christian, belie some small, though profound, lapse of faith?

Now imagine you visit your grandmother, buried in a cemetery. You presume her body lays out under the headstone. Does it matter? Would her grave mean less to you if her body were absent? Why? Would you find comfort in seeing or touching her remains? Are you comforted as much by her interment, the knowledge of death contained, as her memorial?

Why do we isolate ourselves in grief, mimicking death rather than enacting life in society? Why fear the dead awakened, rather than welcoming a chance for reunion? What closure do we find in ceremony and memorial? What comfort do we find in solitude?

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

***Summary Part 1:***

[Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) comes in out of the cold and sleet and into the Whaleman’s Chapel, in which he finds a number of tablets inscribed with the names of whalers and sailors who have died, and had their bodies lost, while on sea-voyages. Ishmael is surprised to find [Queequeg](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/queequeg) also in the chapel, although Queequeg is a “heathen,” or non-Christian. Ishmael also sees young women there, sitting apart, who appear to be mourning lost loved ones. As Ishmael sits, waiting for the service to start, he remarks that “there is death in whaling,” and that it might be his fate to die on his upcoming voyage. But Ishmael also says to himself that his body is but “the lees [sediment] of his better being,” and that, whatever might happen to him, it will not affect his immortal soul, which cannot be destroyed.

***Analysis Part 1:***

Here, Ishmael comes face-to-face with the reality that whaling is no pleasure-sport, but is in fact an extremely dangerous occupation—one that promises adventure and the possibility of physical harm in equal measure. Ishmael steels himself with reference to his “soul,” a religious consideration, but the remainder of the novel does not seem to emphasize Ishmael’s trust in divine protection. Instead, Ishmael seems to think that fate itself—a fate that is not religious, but has more to do with the realities of the natural world—will determine whether he lives or dies at sea.