# ***Chapter VII***

## *The Chapel*

[Whaleman's Chapel:](http://www.nps.gov/nebe/planyourvisit/bethel.htm) a white clapboard church called Seaman's Bethel

In this same New Bedford there stands a Whaleman's Chapel, and few are the moody fishermen, shortly bound for the Indian Ocean or Pacific, who fail to make a Sunday visit to the spot. I am sure that I did not.

Returning from my first morning stroll, I again sallied out upon this special errand. The sky had changed from clear,

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Bearskin: a course, shaggy woolen cloth used for overcoats

Masoned: cut or hewn in stone

sunny cold, to driving sleet and mist. Wrapping myself in my shaggy jacket of the cloth called bearskin, I fought my way against the stubborn storm. Entering, I found a small scattered congregation of sailors, and sailors' wives and widows. A muffled silence reigned, only broken at times by the shrieks of the storm. Each silent worshipper seemed purposely sitting apart from the other, as if each silent grief were insular and incommunicable. The chaplain had not yet arrived; and there these silent islands of men and women sat steadfastly eyeing several marble tablets, with black borders, masoned into the wall on either side the pulpit. Three of them ran something like the following, but I do not pretend to quote:—

Isle of Desolation: [Desolación Island,](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desolaci%C3%B3n_Island" \t "_blank) part of the Tierra Del Fuego archipelago

Sacred  
To the Memory  
of  
JOHN TALBOT,  
Who, at the age of eighteen, was lost overboard,  
Near the Isle of Desolation, off Patagonia,  
*November 1st, 1836.*  
This Tablet  
Is erected to his Memory  
By his Sister.

One of the boats' crews: that is, the crew of one of the small whaleboats sent out from a ship to attack whales

Off-shore Ground: an area of open water far off the northwest coast of South America, discovered in 1818 to be a good place for hunting sperm whales

Sacred  
To the Memory  
of  
ROBERT LONG, WILLIS ELLERY,  
NATHAN COLEMAN, WALTER CANNY,  
SETH MACY, AND SAMUEL GLEIG,  
Forming one of the boats' crews  
of  
the Ship Eliza,  
Who were towed out of sight by a Whale,  
On the Off-shore Ground in the  
Pacific,  
*December 31st, 1839.* This Marble  
Is here placed by their surviving  
Shipmates.

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Bows: the bow or front of a ship

Sacred  
To the Memory  
of  
The late  
CAPTAIN EZEKIEL HARDY,  
Who in the bows of his boat was killed by a  
Sperm Whale on the coast of Japan,  
*August 3rd, 1833.* This Tablet  
Is erected to his Memory  
by  
His Widow.

Countenance: face

Frigid: stiff, formal

Shaking off the sleet from my ice-glazed hat and jacket, I seated myself near the door, and turning sideways was surprised to see Queequeg near me. Affected by the solemnity of the scene, there was a wondering gaze of incredulous curiosity in his countenance. This savage was the only person present who seemed to notice my entrance; because he was the only one who could not read, and, therefore, was not reading those frigid inscriptions on the wall. Whether any of the relatives of the seamen whose names appeared there were now among the congregation, I knew not; but so many are the unrecorded accidents in the fishery, and so plainly did several women present wear the countenance if not the trappings of some unceasing grief, that I feel sure that here before me were assembled those, in whose unhealing hearts the sight of those bleak tablets sympathetically caused the old wounds to bleed afresh.

Blanks: unknowns

[Cave of Elephanta:](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elephanta_Caves) a cave of rock-cut Hindu temples and sculptures on Gharapuri Island, off the coast of Mumbai (Bombay) in India

Oh! ye whose dead lie buried beneath the green grass; who standing among flowers can say—here, *here* lies my beloved; ye know not the desolation that broods in bosoms like these. What bitter blanks in those black-bordered marbles which cover no ashes! What despair in those immovable inscriptions! What deadly voids and unbidden infidelities in the lines that seem to gnaw upon all Faith, and refuse resurrections to the beings who have placelessly perished without a grave. As well might those tablets stand in the cave of Elephanta as here.

In what census of living creatures, the dead of mankind are included; why it is that a universal proverb says of them, that

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[Goodwin Sands:](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goodwin_Sands) a 10-mile-long sandbank in the English Channel, on which more than 2,000 ships are thought to have wrecked

Prefix: add to the beginning

Entitle: name

Immortals: that is, people with immortal souls

they tell no tales, though containing more secrets than the Goodwin Sands; how it is that to his name who yesterday departed for the other world, we prefix so significant and infidel a word, and yet do not thus entitle him, if he but embarks for the remotest Indies of this living earth; why the Life Insurance Companies pay death-forfeitures upon immortals; in what eternal, unstirring paralysis, and deadly, hopeless trance, yet lies antique Adam who died sixty round centuries ago; how it is that we still refuse to be comforted for those who we nevertheless maintain are dwelling in unspeakable bliss; why all the living so strive to hush all the dead; wherefore but the rumor of a knocking in a tomb will terrify a whole city. All these things are not without their meanings.

But Faith, like a jackal, feeds among the tombs, and even from these dead doubts she gathers her most vital hope.

A stove boat: a boat bashed inward or to pieces by the thrashing of a harpooned whale's tail

Brevet: a form of military promotion, usually for valor, in which an officer's rank is raised without a corresponding raise in pay

Bundling: forcefully pushing or carrying

Lees: dregs or residue, such as the sediment at the bottom of a wine barrel

Stove: bashed in

Stave: bash in

It needs scarcely to be told, with what feelings, on the eve of a Nantucket voyage, I regarded those marble tablets, and by the murky light of that darkened, doleful day read the fate of the whalemen who had gone before me, Yes, Ishmael, the same fate may be thine. But somehow I grew merry again. Delightful inducements to embark, fine chance for promotion, it seems—aye, a stove boat will make me an immortal by brevet. Yes, there is death in this business of whaling—a speechlessly quick chaotic bundling of a man into Eternity. But what then? Methinks we have hugely mistaken this matter of Life and Death. Methinks that what they call my shadow here on earth is my true substance. Methinks that in looking at things spiritual, we are too much like oysters observing the sun through the water, and thinking that thick water the thinnest of air. Methinks my body is but the lees of my better being. In fact take my body who will, take it I say, it is not me. And therefore three cheers for Nantucket; and come a stove boat and stove body when they will, for stave my soul, Jove himself cannot.

Modern readers might think that bearskin, like moleskin, is just a name for some fabric but, no, Ishmael's jacket is made from the skin (and fur, apparently) of an actual bear.

The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary says that "Hay-Seed" is a humorous name for a rustic used in the United States, but also gives the first use as being 1889. Moby Dick pre-dates that by almost forty years.

"Can Herr Alexander perform a feat like that?" This is proof that one must check every reference. I thought this was a reference to Alexander the Great, but apparently it refers to the German magician Johann Friedrich Alexander Heimbürger who, though now totally forgotten, was internationally famous at the time Moby Dick was written. The obvious analogy would be a reference to someone in 2150 reading what was a reference to "David Copperfield" and thinking it referred to Charles Dickens's character.

In New Bedford, people are so rich, "they have reservoirs of oil in every house, and every night recklessly burn their lengths in spermaceti candles." Spermaceti candles give a very steady, good light and don't melt or soften in hot weather, but were much more expensive than tallow candles or other cheaper forms of illumination.

Ishmael reports, "And the women of New Bedford, they bloom like their own red roses. But roses only bloom in summer; whereas the fine carnation of their cheeks is perennial as sunlight in the seventh heavens. Elsewhere match that bloom of theirs, ye cannot, save in Salem, where they tell me the young girls breathe such musk, their sailor sweethearts smell them miles off shore, as though they were drawing nigh the odorous Moluccas instead of the Puritanic sands." The reference to the effect of the women of Salem seems to be a veiled suggestion that they are (still) using witchcraft, but there is also a more mundane explanation. The Moluccas (now the Maluku Islands) were also known as the Spice Islands, they had exported spices for at least two thousand years, and Salem had become enormously successful in the spice trade. (In 1790 it was the sixth-largest city in the United States.) The odor Ishmael refers to would have been primarily pepper, nutmeg, and cloves.

Ishmael claims, "In this same New Bedford there stands a Whaleman's Chapel, and few are the moody fishermen, shortly bound for the Indian Ocean or Pacific, who fail to make a Sunday visit to the spot." Apparently all the cannibals, savages, and South Sea islanders do not count in calculating this percentage.

After reading the marble tablets on the walls, commemorating those who died at seas, Ishmael muses, "Oh! ye whose dead lie buried beneath the green grass; who standing among flowers can say--here, here lies my beloved; ye know not the desolation that broods in bosoms like these. What bitter blanks in those black-bordered marbles which cover no ashes! What despair in those immovable inscriptions! What deadly voids and unbidden infidelities in the lines that seem to gnaw upon all Faith, and refuse resurrections to the beings who have placelessly perished without a grave. As well might those tablets stand in the cave of Elephanta as here." There is much to say about this. One is that this still happens, not necessarily in accidents at sea, but in larger contexts. When we visited Latvia, for example, we visited a Jewish cemetery where all the headstones were either from before 1939 or after 1945. For any families left to these people, surely there was some consolation in that they knew where there relatives were buried, while those who lost relatives in the Holocaust often had no knowledge even of where they had died (or been killed).

In Turkey, at Gallipoli, we were told that it was contrary to Muslim custom to put names on anything but the actual headstone on the grave--for example the Turkish memorial at Gallipoli does not include any individual names. So these cenotaphs are not a universal thing.

The caves of Elephanta are seven caves (five Hindu and two Buddhist) near Mumbai (formerly Bombay) containing elaborate sculptures carved from the basalt of the caves. I do not think there are any cenotaphs, making Ishmael's statement a bit peculiar, sort of like saying that they might as well be in the Louvre as here.

"[A] universal proverb says of [the dead], that they tell no tales, though containing more secrets than the Goodwin Sands" The Goodwin Sands is a ten-mile sand bank in the English Channel. Its location near major shipping routes means it is quite dangerous, and one estimate is that over two thousand vessels have been wrecked upon it, leaving their hulls and their crews as the "secrets."

Musing on these memorials, Ishmael asks, "[How] it is that we still refuse to be comforted for those who we nevertheless maintain are dwelling in unspeakable bliss." Indeed, this is a good question, but there is more to it than that. If in fact the afterlife is unspeakable bliss, then the Church has to come up with some reason for people to keep living. Why not just commit suicide and get there even faster? The argument is made that God hates suicide, but the reasoning is a bit contrived, and full of holes. One might claim that many of the martyrs knew that if they continued their activities they would be killed, and so in some sense they were committing suicide.

"Delightful inducements to embark, fine chance for promotion, it seems--aye, a stove boat will make me an immortal by brevet." A brevet is a warrant giving a temporary promotion to a commissioned officer, for example if he needs to fill a position that requires someone of higher rank.

"Methinks we have hugely mistaken this matter of Life and Death. Methinks that what they call my shadow here on earth is my true substance. Methinks that in looking at things spiritual, we are too much like oysters observing the sun through the water, and thinking that thick water the thinnest of air. Methinks my body is but the lees of my better being. In fact take my body who will, take it I say, it is not me. And therefore three cheers for Nantucket; and come a stove boat and stove body when they will, for stave my soul, Jove himself cannot." Is this Plato's Cave in reverse? In Plato's Cave people see shadows and believe them to be reality, while someone who has seen the bodies creating those shadows knows that the shadows are illusions. Yet one could as easily believe that the shadow--the soul--is the "real" entity, and the body merely a shell it wears. Certainly the churches emphasize the preservation of the spirit over that of the body in their glorification of martyrs. And again, Melville's use of "Jove" rather than "Zeus" might indicate an education that got through Latin but not Greek. Then again, there was a lot more emphasis on Roman values than Greek ones in the early days of the American republic.

Analysis:

An eerie storm blows in as Ishmael makes his way to a Whaleman’s Chapel—”few are the moody fishermen, shortly bound for the Indian Ocean or Pacific, who fail to make a Sunday visit to the spot”—inside the Chapel Ishmael finds a gloomily silent audience: “a scattered congregation of sailors, and sailor’s wives and widows”—“Frigid inscriptions” on “marble tablets” reading “To the Memory of…”—settling in, Ishmael is surprised to find Queequeg in attendance—Ishmael ponders the rituals that the living perform to the dead, and how much more strange and strained are the rituals for those poor souls “who have placelessly perished without a grave”—“[In what census of living creatures, the dead of mankind are included; why is it that a universal proverb says of them, that they tell no tales, though containing more secrets than the Goodwin Sands](https://chasingflukes.com/reading_guide/glossary/7goodwin-sands/)”—the congregation sits grief-stricken, silently mourning its dead, but its grief is not shared, communal: “each silent worshipper seemed purposely sitting apart from the other, as if each silent grief were insular and incommunicable”—then it occurs to Ishmael: “oh snap, I might die during this whaling voyage” (ya think?)—“Oh well,” he concludes. “In fact take my body who will, take it I say, it is not me.”

***Quotation1:***

# **“WHY IT IS THAT A UNIVERSAL PROVERB SAYS OF THEM, THAT THEY TELL NO TALES, THOUGH CONTAINING MORE SECRETS THAN THE GOODWIN SANDS”**

[](http://commons.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Strait_of_Dover_map.png)

*Map showing the location of the Strait of Dover. (Photo credit: Wikipedia)*

The Goodwin Sands is a nine-mile stretch of sand bank located along the English Channel, beginning about four miles off the coast of Kingsdown in Kent and extending to Pegswell Bay, south of Ramsgate. Sand banks are raised, mostly linear stretches of land in or extending into a large body of water; also known as shoals, they can be very dangerous to passing ships. This particular sand bank, the Goodwin Sands—which, at low tides emerges from the sea and dries so capable of being walked upon (In 1824 a tradition was established of playing cricket matches on the Sands!), but which, at high tides is mostly submerged and can be lost to view—has long been notorious for the danger it poses to ships of all kinds, and their crews and passengers, of course.

It has caused a multitude of shipwrecks: 1,000 officially recorded wrecks, but some estimate the number to be twice or three-times that amount. The first recorded wreck at the Goodwin Sands occurred in 1298. Owing to its nearness to the English coast, the Goodwin Sands has asserted its sinking influence in several notable naval maneuvers: a fifty-gun frigate, the HM Frigate Sedgmore foundered there in 1698, reportedly carrying over £200,000 in bullion, never recovered; thirteen Man o’ War vessels were sunk there seeking refuge from the Great Storm of 1703, which event Daniel Defoe recorded in The Storm (1704, reprinted in 2003). Historically the Goodwin Sands has been an especial danger to merchant vessels due to its proximity to major shipping lanes that pass through the Strait of Dover. It is a treacherous stretch in otherwise relatively safe and well-traveled waters, making wrecks caused by it all the more tragic.

Given its notorious reputation, the Goodwin Sands has long been the site of maritime safety measures. In recent years GPS technologies and improved charts of the English Channel have circumvented much of the danger it poses. In Melville’s day the region was marked by lightships, some of which themselves fell victim to the Sands. A year after the publication of Moby-Dick, lifeboats began to patrol the region in acknowledgment of the many lives and the other more estimable riches lost there. (See The Heroes of the Goodwin Sands (1892), by Rev. Thomas Stanley Treanor (1873-1910) for a record of the heroic exploits of these lifeboats and their crews.) We know Ishmael to have been asea as a merchant sailor prior to his first whaling voyage, so it is not surprising that his thoughts are drawn to the Goodwin Sands as he ponders the “bitter blanks in those black-bordered marbles which cover no ashes” in the Whaleman’s Chapel in New Bedford, where he will shortly witness Father Mapple’s sermon on Jonah and the whale. Noting in the countenances of many of the women gathered in the chapel the “trappings of some unceasing grief,” he extols the good fortune of mourners “whose dead lie buried beneath the green grass.”

All dead have their secrets. However, Ishmael perceives a profounder void in those “beings who have placelessly perished without a grave.” The Goodwin Sands is a place of this placelessness, which fate it gives Ishmael a brief pang to consider may be his: a secret buried beneath waves, impossible to recover.

[](https://chasingflukes.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/joseph_mallord_william_turner_-_cricket_on_the_goodwin_sands_-_google_art_project1.jpg)

Cricket on the Goodwin Sands, undated, by Joseph Mallord Willam Turner (1775-1851)  
(Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons)