***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 8 –The Pulpit***

***Summary:***

A man arrives at the chapel and climbs up a rope ladder into the pulpit, which is shaped like a ship’s bow. He is Father Mapple, the preacher in this chapel, a favorite among whalemen for his sincerity and ability to make his sermons relevant to their lives. Ishmael wonders about the symbolic significance of Mapple’s dramatic climb into the pulpit.

***Detailed Summary:***

* The chaplain, Father Mapple, enters the chapel, hangs up his wet coat, hat, and boots, and goes to the pulpit to begin the service.
* Father Mapple, Ishmael explains to the reader, was a sailor on a whaling ship when he was younger and has become a clergyman in his old age.
* As a result, he has a lot of interesting mannerisms that most clergymen don’t have.
* The pulpit from which Father Mapple preaches is very high, and, instead of having a long staircase that would crowd the little chapel, it has a ladder on the side, the kind of ladder sailors use to climb up into a ship from a rowboat.
* Father Mapple clambers up this ladder into the pulpit.
* Just as Ishmael is thinking that it really isn’t necessary for this rope ladder to be collapsible like a real shipboard ladder, Father Mapple pulls it up after him.
* Ishmael decides that hauling in the ladder symbolizes the clergyman’s "spiritual withdrawal [...] from all outward worldly ties" (8.4).
* There are other seagoing touches in the chapel, too: there’s a painting hanging behind the pulpit, of a ship in a storm and an angel looking down on it from a sunny cloud. The front of the pulpit and the lectern where the Bible sits are shaped like the bow of a ship.
* Ishmael makes this all into a (rather strained?) analogy: "the world’s a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow" (8.7).

***Brief Summary:***

Ishmael has not been seated long in the chapel when [Father Mapple](https://www.gradesaver.com/moby-dick/study-guide/character-list#father-mapple), the famous preacher, enters. He was once a sailor and a harpooner, but had dedicated his life to the ministry for several years. Father Mapple enjoys a wide reputation for sincerity and sanctity, so Ishmael cannot suspect him of any mere stage tricks. On the front of the pulpit is the likeness of a ship's bluff bows and the Holy Bible rested on a projecting piece of scroll work, fashioned after a ship's fiddle-headed beak. Ishmael wonders what the meaning could be, for the pulpit is the earth's foremost part; all the rest comes from in its rear, and the pulpit leads the world. According to Ishmael, "the world's a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete, and the pulpit is its prow."

Analysis:

The dominant theme of this chapter is the relationship between whaling and the Melville relates whaling to spiritual matters once again through this chapter, in which Father Mapple represents both of these disparate aspects. The pulpit from which Mapple preaches also relates whaling to spiritual matters. Melville explicitly makes the comparison between the world and a ship on a voyage, thus preparing the reader to relate the actual ship on its impending voyage to the world in general.

***Significance :***

in “The Pulpit,” Ishmael introduces the fantastic, though brief, character of Father Mapple, a reverend via the holy order of whaling. Father Mapple spent his youth as a harpooneer and, to Ishmael’s great transfixion, carries “clerical peculiarities about him, imputable to that adventurous maritime life he had led.” Father Mapple arrives at church through a storm, bedecked in a sailor’s hat and overcoat. He strips the outerwear to reveal his inner identity as spiritual leader, and climbs into his prow-shaped pulpit via rope ladder “with a sailor-like but still reverential dexterity.” Father Mapple then hoists his rope ladder, isolating himself in his pulpit.

Ishmael clearly finds great significance in all these details. In his description and analysis of Father Mapple, Ishmael constructs a definition of sailor as pilgrim that stretches throughout Moby-Dick as a whole. Here, in discussing the significance of Mapple’s prow-inspired pulpit, Ishmael thinks “What could be more full of meaning? — for the pulpit is ever this earth’s foremost part; all the rest comes in its rear; the pulpit leads the world.”

I am left to wonder: who stands in this pulpit at sea, in the isolated spiritual search of the whaler? Ahab stands out as an obvious parallel to Mapple — both being captains of sorts, both being old and wizened, both idiosyncratic to say the least — and I would not put this kind of bleak spiritual implication past moody Ishmael, but as we see with Mapple in the following chapter, he doesn’t bear the heavens or the earth with any of Ahab’s malice. In fact, what we see most of Mapple in his sermon is a contemplative and observant storyteller, much more akin to Ishmael, the captain of our narrative, and the Noah of the book’s final flood (there’s hope for us yet!). The thought of an Ishmael at the prow of the world carries many interesting implications, especially in considering that Ishmael is no captain at all. Rather, he is a listener, an observer, a thinker, and an honest teller of his own inner truths. What more could we possibly aspire to as human beings?

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

***Summary Part 1:***

[Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) watches as the preacher of the chapel, named [Father Mapple](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters) and famous in New Bedford for his sermons, enters the chapel and climbs, using a ladder, onto the pulpit, which is shaped like the prow of a whaling ship. Ishmael remarks on the scene, which appears to separate Father Mapple from the rest of the congregation. There is also a picture of a little angel in the corner of the chapel, shining onto the pulpit with its radiant light. Ishmael closes this brief chapter by convincing himself that it is proper the chapel have a pulpit shaped like a boat, since the pulpit is the “prow of the world,” or the part of human society that leads man forward in time, against whatever storms or difficulties God, or life, or fate seem to toss at man.

***Analysis Part 1:***

Yet, despite Ishmael’s lack of reliance on religious teachings as the novel progresses, Ishmael nevertheless recognizes the power of religious rhetoric, and is here impressed by Father Mapple’s chapel, and by the particular architecture of the pulpit. Ishmael and many of the other sailors often use nautical imagery to describe things on land—as though their time on the ship becomes the primary metaphor for understanding the world around them. In this way, they sail through their lives just as a ship sails through danger in the open ocean.