***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 9 –The Sermon***

***Summary:***

Mapple takes his theme for this Sunday’s sermon from the story of Jonah, the prophet swallowed by “a great fish”—in other words, a whale. Mapple, typically, uses Jonah’s story to preach about man’s sin and his willful disobeying of God’s commandments. But, Mapple claims, the story also speaks to him personally, urging him to fulfill God’s will by “preach[ing] the Truth in the face of Falsehood!” Drained by his emotional sermon, Mapple ends kneeling, his hands covering his face, as the crowd files out.

***Brief Analysis:***

These chapters establish the basic plot and thematic conflicts of Moby-Dick and also introduce two of the novel’s most important characters, Queequeg and Ishmael, the latter of whom is the novel’s narrator. The enigmatic command “Call me Ishmael” lends a mysteriousness to the narrator’s identity; nevertheless, his seemingly adopted name signals his identification with the biblical outcast from the Book of Genesis. One of the first things we learn about Ishmael is that he is going to sea as a sort of self-annihilation—an alternative to “throw[ing] himself upon his sword.” Ishmael is a dreamer, given to philosophical speculation, but essentially passive. He is more of an observer than a major participant.

Although it is not apparent from the novel’s first chapter, Ishmael is more than just the narrator. His remarks later in the novel indicate that he has produced the text that we have in our hands and that the extracts and scholarly materials that preface the book are the fruits of his own researches. From the outset of his narrative, there is a marked difference between Ishmael’s low status as a character, in which role he is a nearly penniless and inexperienced junior hand on board ship, and his magisterial presence as a narrator, with his sweeping philosophical and scientific ambitions. Clearly, he writes as a much older and more experienced sailor than he is during the events of the novel.

Ishmael’s lengthy and speculative digressions suggest that the things he observes have metaphorical significance, but it is often difficult to discern what specific things signify: even Ishmael himself seems to be uncertain in this regard. Father Mapple’s elaborate pulpit, for example, appears to have a symbolic meaning, but Ishmael admits that he cannot quite figure out what it is. The painting on the wall of the Spouter-Inn is so dark and dirty that it is almost impossible to make out its subject, and Ishmael offers several alternatives for what it may depict. In the end, he determines that it shows a whale attacking a ship and impaling itself upon the ship’s masts. This interpretation, however, doesn’t seem particularly realistic, and offers more confusion than clarity.

The two churches that Ishmael enters in these chapters suggest two distinct religious attitudes. The sermon preached in the black church is on “the blackness of darkness,” suggesting that evil is impenetrable and cannot be understood by human beings. Father Mapple’s sermon about Jonah demands that people heed God’s call and proclaim the truth even in the face of great hostility, even when that truth goes against conventional ways of thinking. While the first sermon exemplifies the belief that the human being’s power of understanding truth is extremely limited, the second suggests that God gives humans the power to apprehend truth, and that men and women should be so confident in their vision of this truth as to defy any opposition. Throughout Ishmael’s narrative, these two interpretations of human understanding vie with one another for primacy.

The comical process by which Ishmael befriends Queequeg introduces one of the novel’s major facets: the topic of race relations. By developing a relationship with this “savage,” Ishmael shows that he isn’t bound by his prejudices. Indeed, his interactions with Queequeg make Ishmael realize that although most would call Queequeg a savage, the harpooner actually has a deeper understanding of what “civilization” means than most whites do, as his grooming habits demonstrate. Realizing that Queequeg treats him “with so much civility and consideration” while he himself was “guilty of great rudeness,” Ishmael reexamines stereotypes about so-called savages. In fact, “for all his tattooings,” says Ishmael, Queequeg “was on the whole a clean, comely looking cannibal.” Queequeg’s tattoos and supposed cannibalism mark him, in terms of nineteenth-century beliefs, as the ultimate savage. Tattooing is a voluntary alteration of the body that, unlike a hairstyle or clothing choice, is permanent; cannibalism is another fundamental Western taboo. Beyond these two characteristics, Queequeg is a veritable melting pot of different racial and ethnic traits: African, Polynesian, Islamic, Christian, and Native American. Allegedly from Kokovoko, an island in the South Seas, he worships an idol that looks like “a three days’ old Congo baby” (West African) in a Ramadan (Islamic) ceremony and carries a tomahawk pipe (North American indigenous tribal).

***Detailed Summary:***

* Father Mapple almost seems to think that he’s actually still *on* a ship: he uses maritime terminology to order the congregation to cluster together.
* Father Mapple leads the congregation in a prayer and a hymn. The hymn, a version of Psalm 18, is a Jonah-esque tale of being trapped in the belly of a whale and escaping.
* Then Father Mapple begins preaching on—what else?—the story of Jonah and the whale, focusing especially on Jonah’s disobedience toward God’s commands. We think you will agree that Ishmael’s made it *pretty clear* by now that the main topic of this novel will be whaling.
* (At this point it might be useful for you to read [the Book of Jonah](https://www.shmoop.com/jonah-minor-prophets/jonah-summary.html), which is (a) really short, and (b) pretty important background for this chapter in particular, and for *Moby-Dick* in general.)
* Father Mapple retells the story of Jonah to the congregation in his own way, modernizing it a little and making the seafaring details more concrete:
* Disobeying God, Jonah decides to flee God’s wrath by getting on a ship made by men and going across the known world.
* As Jonah tries to book passage on a ship, Father Mapple imagines his fear that he will be discovered and the suspicion of the mariners that he has committed some terrible crime.
* Father Mapple further imagines that the captain of the ship can tell Jonah has a guilty conscience, but doesn’t care because Jonah pays for his passage on the ship ahead of time—and pays much more than the going rate.
* Jonah then goes into his cabin and lies down, but can’t lock the door because he doesn’t have a key.
* The small, cramped cabin foreshadows Jonah’s time in the belly of the whale.
* Jonah watches the lamp that hangs from the ceiling swinging slowly; he knows the lamp is hanging straight because of gravity, and that makes it obvious that everything else is crooked as the ship rocks slowly back and forth.
* Father Mapple makes this an allegory for Jonah’s conscience (like the lamp, it always hangs straight) and his soul (which is all crooked-like).
* Finally Jonah falls asleep as the ship sails on.
* As Jonah sleeps, a fierce storm blows up, and all the sailors work hard to keep the ship from sinking.
* The captain goes to Jonah to wake him, and Jonah stumbles out onto the deck.
* The sailors vote (or "cast lots") to find the cursed one responsible for the violent storm, and they decide it must be Jonah.
* The sailors start asking him questions about who he is and where he comes from.
* Jonah explains that he is a Hebrew who has defied God.
* Jonah doesn’t ask God for forgiveness yet, but he tells the sailors they should throw him overboard and save themselves.
* The sailors try to save the ship without throwing Jonah overboard, but eventually they give up and take him up on the offer.
* Suddenly, the sea calms: the storm is centered on Jonah personally.
* Whirled around by his own personal storm, Jonah almost doesn’t notice when the whale swallows him.
* In the whale’s belly, Jonah prays to God for forgiveness, but *not* for his punishment to end.
* Jonah accepts God’s punishment as justice, which is why, says Father Mapple, God eventually has mercy on him.
* Father Mapple pauses for a moment, and then explains that the story he’s just related is the lesson regular churchgoers should derive from the story of Jonah.
* As a clergyman, there is another, more difficult lesson that he must accept personally: if someone chosen by God to be a prophet or a leader refuses to preach the truth, as Jonah did, then God will visit a terrible punishment on him.
* However, Father Mapple says, the reverse is even more true—God will grant favor and delight to those who do preach the truth.
* Father Mapple blesses the congregation and kneels, covering his face with his hands, while everyone leaves the chapel.

***Analysis:***

Father Mapple, an elderly but vigorous man of God, ascends to the pulpit by climbing a rope ladder like one used to mount a ship from a boat at sea. He was a harpooner in his youth, and he alludes to the imagery of seamen frequently in his sermon, referring to the congregation, for example, as his "shipmates." The pulpit itself is shaped like the prow of a ship and features a painting of a vessel battling a storm near a rocky coast, an angel of hope watching over it. The text for the sermon is the Old Testament's Book of Jonah, the story of Jonah and the whale.

The setting is the *Whaleman's*Chapel, and everything about it reminds the visitor of life and death at sea. Father Mapple is like the captain of the ship, the congregation his crew. When he enters the pulpit, he pulls the rope ladder up after him, symbolically cutting himself off, for the time, from worldly matters. This act foreshadows the way in which the *Pequod*, when set at sea, becomes its own microcosm (a symbolic little world), peopled by a diverse crew, isolated, captained not by the spiritual Father Mapple but by the troubled, rebellious, angry Ahab.

The sermon centers on the Old Testament story of Jonah and the whale. Its theme is that we must serve God by transcending our own self-interests: "And if we obey God, we must disobey ourselves; and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists," Mapple states. This theme continues throughout the novel; the sermon sets its tone. The reader should remember this sermon in relationship to Ahab, who sins in numerous ways throughout the book but never repents and whose greatest sin is that he abjures all obligation to everything but his own desire for revenge.

The reader might recall that Ishmael concedes, early on in the book, that he has no problem serving a higher authority; we will discover that Ahab does. Jonah tries to flee his responsibility to God, but he finds that there is no place where God does not reign. Cast overboard during a storm at sea, Jonah is swallowed by a whale. Jonah's salvation comes only when he transcends his own desires and submits to God's will. Readers might profit from reviewing the short Book of Jonah, only four brief chapters — or "yarns" as Father Mapple calls them. Serious students of the novel certainly should study Mapple's sermon, in which, according to Mapple, are two great messages: The first message is do not sin, but, if you do, repent properly, not "clamoring for pardon, but grateful for punishment." The second, and the more awful, message is preach truth in the face of falsehood.

This chapter cements the connection between the physical and metaphysical, the worldly and the religious, the actual and the metaphoric. Jonah's story parallels Ahab's in that it represents man's relationship with his universe and his god(s). Jonah's approach was more God centered; Ahab's is more man centered.

Glossary

**larboard**the left-hand side of the ship as one faces forward; also called *port.*

**starboard**the right-hand side of the ship as one faces forward.

**flouts**mocks or scoffs at, shows contempt for.

**cupidity**avarice, greed.

***Significance (Ch6-9) :***

Out on the streets of New Bedford, [Ishmael](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Ishmael) describes the variety of people who are out and about. He then assures the reader that there are not only "harpooners, cannibals, and bumpkins" in the town, but also many wealthy people who have made their living in the whaling industry. Because it is Sunday, Ishmael goes to a Whaleman's Chapel in Chapter 7, housing marble tablets inscribed with names of those lost or killed at sea. Ishmael takes a seat and is surprised to notice [Queequeg](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Queequeg) is there, too. The marble tablets remind him that he is about to embark on a voyage that may end in his death, but this fact does not frighten him. He does not fear the destruction of his body, for he feels his soul is indestructible.

A robust chaplain named Father Mapple enters the chapel in Chapter 8, takes off his wet jacket and hat, and ascends to the high pulpit by a rope ladder similar to one used to climb onto a ship. Ishmael is surprised that Father Mapple pulls the rope ladder up after him when he is situated in the pulpit. The pulpit is shaped like the front of a ship, which Ishmael feels is appropriate. Father Mapple asks the congregation to sit closer in Chapter 9, then kneels, prays, and leads a hymn. He then preaches a powerful sermon about the biblical book of Jonah. His sermon centers on the topic of obedience to God, noting that "if we obey God, we must disobey ourselves; and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists." Mapple uses his knowledge of ships and sailing to elaborate on the story of Jonah's attempt to run away from the task God had set before him. Mapple commends Jonah's repentance—which took place in the belly of the giant fish—to the congregation as a model for their own repentance. After his impassioned sermon, he covers his face with his hands, and the congregation quietly leaves.

[Ishmael](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Ishmael), who is himself about to go to sea on a whaling boat, takes notice of the many marble tablets that are displayed in the chapel. He considers that their message to him is one of warning: "there is death in this business of whaling." While he doesn't seem too worried about this at the present time, this episode (again) foreshadows later plot events in which the captain and crew of the ship he's on are all killed by a sperm whale, save one.

Besides being about Jonah and a large fish or whale, a topic Ishmael will have a great deal to say about in later chapters, Father Mapple's sermon, introduces several important themes that will be developed over the course of the novel. Just like Jonah, Ahab will try to follow his own plan rather than obeying the mission of the *Pequod*'s owners. He will attempt to kill a creature much larger and more powerful than himself, one that represents the unknowable mysteries, displaying an arrogance certainly classified as sinful pride. And like Jonah, he will be punished by a great whale acting as an agent of God (or fate, or nature, or all three). (It should be noted that the biblical story of Jonah does not refer to a whale, but to a great fish. This detail will be taken up in a much later chapter by Ishmael.)

The presence of [Queequeg](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Queequeg) in the chapel is a small detail that hints at an issue Ishmael will explore on and off throughout the book—the difference between "heathens" and Christians. Although the issues framed are religious in nature, they are also racial issues. In the novel, whaling as an industry is revealed to be one in which white men and those of other races mingle and coexist. Even though there is still a racial hierarchy, respect for one another is one aspect of the relationships on the ship.

***Critical Study:***

For better or worse, our experience of literature changes through the ages, especially when said literature reaches iconic status. Every year I read Shakespeare with my sixth graders, and though I don’t waste a second of time talking about Shakespeare’s life (who cares?), I’m always sure to spend at least some time discussing the history of theater, because I think it’s important for them to understand that Shakespeare as Inaccessible High Culture is a relatively new idea — Shakespeare wrote for the people, and the people threw apple cores at the actors if they weren’t having fun, kind of like the Muppet Show. In other words, you need to read Shakespeare looking for the entertainment of it all, not for the secret of life.

I realized that my thoughts about this week’s chapter have been influenced by the book’s iconic status as well, albeit in a totally different way.  After evoking preacher-as-captain imagery in the preceding chapter, Ishmael begins Chapter 9, “The Sermon,” by setting Father Mapple in stark contrast to Ahab, as Mapple sings a hymn about salvation at the hands of a forgiving God. Mapple’s sermon continues with a masochistic message about Jonah displaying true repentance by being “grateful for punishment,” and concludes with a message for all spiritual leaders: “Yea, woe to him who, as the great Pilot Paul has it, while preaching to others is himself a castaway!” The sermon seems a ready foil for Ahab and his madness.

But we haven’t met Ahab at this point in the story. In fact, Ishmael hasn’t even reached Nantucket, or heard of the Pequod. Sure, Ishmael is a masterful storyteller, and Moby-Dick an extremely well-planned tale. And sure, every good storyteller builds themes before introducing the main plot arc. But still, like most people (I think), I went into Moby-Dick looking for the secret of Ahab, because that’s what Moby-Dick means as an iconic piece of literature. What I got instead, of course, was the secret of Ishmael — a terrifically entertaining story. It’s nice to remember that, for the most part anyway, the classics are classics for a reason — not because they are painful to read though good for us, but because they’re really good books that have entertained people for centuries.

***Notes(Ch7-9):***

As is customary for those fishermen who are about to set out for sea, Ishmael goes to take in a worship service at a local whaleman's chapel. The weather has changed from clear and sunny to sleet and mist as Ishmael heads for the chapel. Once there, he is surprised to see Queequeg among the gathered worshippers. As they wait, most of the worshippers look at three stone tablets placed on the walls of the church on either side of the pulpit. These tablets are placed in memory of seamen who have been killed in service. As Ishmael waits for the service to begin, he contemplates that his fate might be the same as the men who are commemorated on the plaques. He considers the unnatural fear man has of death and the hereafter. In conclusion, he decides if his fate is to be the same as one of the men killed in service, he welcomes it.

Father Mapple the chaplain arrives. In his youth, this man was both a whaleman and harpooner and is greatly loved by the whaling community as he has experienced the hard life of a whaleman but has not allowed it to make him harsh or angry. Ishmael describes the chaplain as being in the winter of his life but appearing to be nearing a second bloom.

Interestingly, the high pulpit can only be reached by a ladder, the kind that is used to climb up the side of a large boat from a smaller one. Ishmael is surprised that after the chaplain climbs to his spot in the pulpit, he pulls the ladder up, rung by rung, so that he is in as way isolated and unreachable in the pulpit. Ishmael describes the rest of the church and its unusual sea faring décor. Above the pulpit is a painting of a storm tossed ship watched by an angel who peeks through the clouds. Also, the pulpit has been decorated and fashioned to look like the prow of a boat.

Father Mapple delivers a sermon to those gathered about Jonah and the whale. In this Bible story, the prophet Jonah refuses to do God's will and instead decides to hide in Joppa. The boat he sails on is caught in a storm that will not cease until Jonah is thrown overboard. Once overboard, he is swallowed by a whale. He repents while in the whale's belly and is spat out by the whale upon dry land.

The commemorative plaques in the church again act as a foreshadowing agent that Ishmael's voyage may be deadly. The reality of death at sea adds to the grim tone of the novel. Also continued is the theme of the mixing of different cultures as Ishmael discovers that Queequeg, a pagan, has also chosen to take part in the Christian worship service.

Melville incorporates a great deal of sea faring imagery into this chapter. For instance, as Ishmael explains, the chaplain pulls up the rope ladder of the pulpit after himself signifying his isolation from the world and his dependence on the sustenance of the word of God. The painting on the wall of the storm tossed ship brings to mind that even in the hardest parts of life, there is a greater Being in control. Finally, the pulpit in the form of a ships prow can be said to symbolize the Word of God in relation to the world where the world is the ship and the pulpit, or Word, should lead the ship on its journey.

Using the familiar story from the Bible about Jonah and the whale, Father Mapple teaches the worshipers that it is always best to do the bidding of God. He teaches that it is always better to be secure in the will of God and misunderstood by men than to try to please men and be out of the will of God. Father Mapple chooses this particular passage for his sermon, because it is a topic the whaling men are sure to understand and to which they can relate easily.

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

***Summary Part 1:***

[Mapple](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters) begins his sermon with a prayer and a hymn, the latter taken from the end of the first chapter of the Book of Jonah in the Bible, in which Jonah is “swallowed by a whale.” Mapple states that the story of Jonah is important for two reasons: it provides advice for men and women who wish to avoid a life of sin; and it provides advice, too, for leaders of men, or “captains” in life, who wish to keep others from sin. Mapple begins retelling the story of Jonah, framing it in terms of a man on a whaling vessel in the nineteenth century. Mapple emphasizes that Jonah is “fleeing from God” because of crimes and sins he has committed, and Mapple seems also to blame the greed of the captain for letting Jonah on the ship, since Jonah promises to pay the captain a large sum of money for safe passage.

***Analysis Part 1:***

One of the first references in the novel to the story of Jonah, which will be reinterpreted and rehashed throughout the narrative. Ishmael seems to accord a primary importance to the story, because it is in the Bible, and because it is one of the first instances in recorded literature in which man interacts with a whale. Notably, too, Jonah is saved by God after being swallowed by the whale—he is tested, but is ultimately redeemed. Yet Mapple's sermon also touches on the captain, who in this case makes selfish decisions based on money. The emphasis on captains foreshadows Ahab, though Ahab's "sin" has nothing to do with money.

***Summary Part 2:***

[Mapple](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters) continues with the story of Jonah: God sends a storm to upset the ship on which Jonah travels, and Jonah comes abovedecks, telling the crew that he believes he is the cause of the ship’s distress. The crew then throws Jonah overboard, and Jonah is saved from drowning by being swallowed, whole, by a “leviathan,” or whale. In the whale’s stomach, Jonah repents and tells God that only He can guarantee Jonah’s “deliverance,” and God, pleased that Jonah exhibits such devotion in his time of crisis, eventually allows Jonah to escape the whale’s stomach.

***Analysis Part 2:***

Readers of the Hebrew Bible often forget that Jonah was punished, and swallowed by the whale, as “repayment” for disobeying God’s direct orders to go and preach in a certain part of the Mediterranean region. Jonah’s time in the whale causes him to realize that God is in fact all-powerful, and only when Jonah submits then is Jonah set free and allowed to return to the land.

***Summary Part 3:***

Thus [Mapple](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters) draws to the conclusion of his sermon, and to his original “two points” of the Jonah story. He reiterates that Jonah recognized his sins and repented, and for that he was saved. But Mapple also explains the nature of Jonah’s original crime, from which he wished to flee and to board the ship in the first place—that Jonah was to preach God’s word and failed to do so, that Jonah had disobeyed God’s orders. Mapple states that the story of Jonah is, for him and for others who are “pilots of men,” a warning about shirking one’s duty, about ignoring God’s commands, about believing that there is a morality other than God’s that dictates man’s actions. Mapple closes his sermon by asking, “what is man that he should live out the lifetime of his God?”

***Analysis Part 3:***

Mapple therefore reinforces this “moral” to the story—that, like Jonah, the sailors who leave from New Bedford must always keep in mind the orders of their superiors, and must avoid doing what their own conscience tells them, as that conscience might be wrong, or cowardly. Of course, Ahab, Ishmael’s captain, considers himself a god aboard his own ship, and therefore Ishmael would be obeying both his “captain” and his “lord” if he were to follow Ahab’s commands. And, for the most part, Ishmael is in fact obedient to Ahab’s wishes. Yet Mapple's sermon continues to resonate as Ahab's mad refusal to submit, his belief in his own destiny to kill Moby Dick, endangers all. Should the men submit to Ahab as Jonah does to God? Should men submit to their human leaders?