

Close reading of  
herman melville's  
moby-dick chapter  
110 'queequeg in his  
coffin' ...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Throughout Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, the character of Queequeg, the New Zealander harpooner, is presented by Melville as possibly the most heroic and honestly good natured of the crew of the novel's main setting, the whaling ship *Pequod*. He forms a healthy relationship based upon respect and affection with the novel's narrator, Ishmael, and the concepts and ideas that surround him are a direct and intentional contrast to those surrounding the novel's focus and ideological antagonist, the *Pequod*'s Captain Ahab. Queequeg's natural heroism and Melville's idealism of him is exhibited in Queequeg's stoic relationship with death through Chapter 110, 'Queequeg in his Coffin'[1], where Queequeg also comes to serve as a vehicle for Melville's theories on race relations within American society.

The focus of the chapter is Queequeg, who in his first meeting with Ishmael is described as an "abominable savage" [Melville, pg. 20] and throughout the novel is depicted as having an intimidating physicality, and how, gripped by fever, he accepts death in a way that baffles the American crew of the *Pequod*. Queequeg's illness is the focus of the reader's sympathy in that it is brought on by Queequeg and the other harpooners being used for heavy labour due to their stamina and strength, Ishmael confessing that "among whalemens, the harpooners are the holders" [Melville, pg. 392]. The reader, biased by Ishmael's sympathetic tone, therefore comes to view Queequeg as the victim of exploitation and thus his illness as a consequence of unfairness in an environment biased towards the American sailors, even the inexperienced Ishmael. This sympathy from the reader is emphasised by Ishmael, and thus by default Melville, idealising the dying Queequeg by stating "like circles on the water, which, as they grow fainter, expand; so his

eyes seemed rounding, like the rings of Eternity." [Melville, pg. 393] Melville thus depicts Queequeg as a character that intentionally, in the beginning of this chapter, appeals to the reader's sympathies, the tone being one that exaggerates his "savage" and mysterious nature so as to emphasise Queequeg existing in a foreign and unfamiliar environment.

The tone of Melville, however, changes in chapter following Queequeg's request for his coffin to be built. The tone explicitly changes from sympathy to confusion and intrigue, Melville aligning the reading with the crew of the Pequod through their mutual lack of understanding of Queequeg's odd practices. Ishmael describes Queequeg's request as a "strange circumstance" [Melville, pg. 394] and notes that the crew react with "indignant and half-humorous cries" [Melville, pg. 394], Melville therefore highlighting how the entire situation is a direct contrast to the culture of the American sailors. But the bewilderment of the crew is nothing in comparison to that of the reader when Ishmael recounts that "there lay Queequeg in his coffin with little but his composed countenance in view." [Melville, pg. 395] Melville brings special attention to Queequeg's unorthodox reaction to his supposedly imminent death. While the Americans aboard the Pequod are so displaced by Queequeg that their reactions range from the inquisitive description of it being a "strange circumstance" to mockery and anger, Queequeg waits for death with a "composed countenance". Melville thus suggests that Queequeg understand something about death that the crew, a symbol of America juxtaposed to the savage, and the reader do not, a fact that drives them to bewilderment and rage.

Melville suggests that through his separation from the American, and thus also Christian, society, Queequeg has acquired a certain relationship with death that allows him to view it with stoicism and respect. This relationship is summarised in Ishmael stating that Queequeg “ had changed his mind about dying” [Melville, pg. 396] and Queequeg’s belief that “ nothing but a whale, or a gale, or some violent, ungovernable, destroyer” could kill him.

Queequeg’s belief that only violent causes can kill a man, and that all others can simply be overcome if only “ a man made up his mind to live”, [Melville, pg. 396] not simply adds to Melville’s idealisation of this character, but also presents him as an ideological opponent to the obsessed Captain Ahab.

The novel concludes with all characters, with the exception of Ishmael, drowning after a failed encounter with the novel’s titular whale. Queequeg’s reference to a whale being a force that can truly kill a man not only adds depth to the whale being a symbol throughout the novel for the unstoppable forces of nature, but also a piece of foreshadowing and irony. The sole reason that the Pequod chases Moby-Dick across the Pacific is Ahab’s obsession. Several characters, namely the first mate Starbuck, advise Ahab to abort his foolish mission, therefore suggesting that the whale could be avoided if only Ahab were to view the situation lucidly and objectively, understanding that his vendetta is one based on flawed logic. Melville presents Ahab as the antagonist and not Moby-Dick, the latter instead being an element of nature that is simply following its instinct and should not be held accountable for its actions. It could be interpreted, therefore, that it is not Moby-Dick that leads the crew of the Pequod to their death, but rather the obsession of their unhinged Captain. As Ahab’s obsession is not a

physical force of violence but rather the psychological will of a man, by Queequeg's logic it is something that can be overcome to avoid death. Through hindsight, therefore, the reader, using Queequeg's logic within this chapter, can further the villainous image of Ahab that Melville has placed upon him.

Besides to evoke the reader's sympathies and serve as an opponent to Captain Ahab, Queequeg serves as Melville's presentation of the noble savage and a symbol of his vision of how pagan and Christian cultures could integrate with one another. The noun that Melville uses most while referring to Queequeg is savage, closely followed by pagan. Though, throughout the novel, Ismael's use of these terms change from the fear of "abominable savage" to the possessive intimacy of "my poor pagan", [Melville, pg. 392] Melville capitalises upon the image of Queequeg being a foreigner in a bewildering environment. Furthermore, Queequeg's character is emphasised through several other elements of the chapter, including his reaction to death that is presented as so overtly opposed to the American norm, as well as the inclusion of Queequeg's idol Yojo in his coffin and his describing coffins as "certain little canoes of dark wood". [Melville, pg. 393] All of these elements alienate Queequeg further from the American crew and emphasise his "otherness" and perfect him as a caricature of the noble savage.

Queequeg is presented, especially in this chapter, as having a far better understanding of the forces of nature and their effect on the human individual than the American crew, specifically Ahab. His pagan beliefs and savage heritage allow him to better understand the natural world and thus place him upon a pedestal in comparison to the greedy and egotistical

Americans. Queequeg thus comes to symbolise something of an Emersonian figure in the novel, even more so than the naïve and optimistic Ishmael; a character that is fully aware of the power of nature and fully in control of his mind, body and spirit. There is, therefore, another great irony in that this truly transcendental character succumbs to the brutal forces of nature, a symbol of Melville's rejection of Emersonian philosophy. Queequeg's savagery becomes of a joke in this respect, Melville exploiting it for a rebuttal to the popular intellectual thought of the time.

However, Queequeg's "otherness" does come to serve an abolitionist cause. By idealising Queequeg, Melville idealises a major character that is not white and also free and celebrated amongst a white American community.

Ishmael's open fondness for Queequeg and the intimate relationship between the two comes to serve as an example of how well integration works within society if people of different races recognise each other as equals, as Ishmael does with Queequeg. Through the idealised savage Queequeg, Melville creates an idealised hypothetical community. However, Peter Coviello notes that this community is "a utopianism about which Melville feels precious little optimism".[1] The community dies almost entirely due to the selfish and flawed nature of man, presenting little hope for integration in Eighteenth Century America beyond hypotheticals.

Furthermore, Queequeg is the only savage aboard the Pequod who is idealised to such an extreme degree. For example Fedallah, a Parsee harpooner, is believed to be the reincarnation of the devil, summoned by Ahab, by much of the crew. Ishmael's use of a possessive pronoun in "my poor pagan" could be interpreted as ownership rather than kinship and

intimacy, something which, in the pre-Civil War context of the novels composition, implicates negatively upon the abolitionary notions of Melville. It is hinted, therefore, that despite Melville's best intentions to present the Pequod as vessel of positive race relations and equality, it exists as it truly does to the reader, a piece of fiction detached from the real America.

In this chapter Melville extensively uses Queequeg as a metaphor for many of the key ideas of Moby-Dick, ranging from Melville's criticism of transcendentalist thought to his ideas concerning race. Queequeg is certainly one of the few characters in the novel that is consistently portrayed favourably by Melville, his honest and noble sensibilities become the focus Melville's search for a truly heroic character aboard the Pequod. It could be argued, however, that this heroism that Melville celebrates so enthusiastically is also somewhat exploited. Melville intentionally uses Queequeg's paganism as a pessimistic critique of American culture, highlighting and possibly satirising Queequeg's beliefs that are directly opposed to Christian norms. Nonetheless, Queequeg comes to serve as a symbol of honour aboard the Pequod and a moral opponent to Captain Ahab, exuding a respect and understanding of the forces of nature that, if shared by the rest of the characters, could spare the novel of its tragic conclusion.