

# Race and american culture in moby dick

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## **Moby Dick Analysis: The Perception of Race on the Pequod**

In *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville examines the themes of race and power through the perspective of Ishmael, a white Christian man living in nineteenth-century America. Melville reflects on the hierarchical structures established in the American society and how they correlate with race. The Pequod, the setting for a majority of the story, serves as a model of society on a smaller scale. In this tiny, isolated community, a clear social order is established with Ahab and Starbuck at the top and crewmen such as Queequeg and Pip at the bottom. Men of different religions, cultures, and ethnic backgrounds all inhabit the boat which leads to Ishmael challenging the ideas about culture perpetuated by society and becoming more introspective in regards to his own feelings on race. Throughout the novel, the dynamics of a multicultural community in the nineteenth century are examined and perception of these differing cultures through the eyes of a white American man is shown; through this perspective Melville is given an opportunity to challenge the notions of white supremacy.

Over the course of *Moby Dick*, Ishmael's view on race and whiteness changes. His first encounter with someone who challenges his ideas on normalcy and white supremacy is Queequeg. Ishmael hesitantly shares a bed with Queequeg in a motel and questions every action he takes.

Regarding Queequeg, Ishmael says, " But there was no time for shuddering, for now the savage went about something that completely fascinated my attention, and convinced me that he must indeed be a heathen. Going to his heavy grego, or wrapall, or dreadnaught, which he had previously hung on a

chair, he fumbled in the pockets, and produced at length a curious little deformed image with a hunch on its back, and exactly the colour of a three days' old Congo baby." Ishmael carefully analyzes everything Queequeg does the first night that they have to share a bed with each other because of his ignorance to a cannibal's way of life.

In the town of New Bedford, Queequeg is instantly labeled as an outsider because of his dark complexion, thick accent, and cannibalistic practices. Ishmael states, " If I had been astonished at first catching a glimpse of so outlandish an individual as Queequeg circulating among the polite society of a civilized town, that astonishment soon departed upon taking my first daylight stroll through the streets of New Bedford." While Ishmael regards New Bedford as a calm, civilized community, he identifies Queequeg as the antithesis of this. From Ishmael's perspective, whiteness and Western culture is what is most normal and correct way of living. People from other places with differing cultures are less advanced and should be the ones to assimilate. After spending some time thinking about where all of his fear and reservation towards Queequeg is stemming from, Ishmael realises that Queequeg has every right to be as fearful of him. Ishmael says, " What's all this fuss I have been making about, thought I to myself—the man's a human being just as I am: he has just as much reason to fear me, as I have to be afraid of him. Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian." It is hard for anyone to be comfortable around someone completely different from them. The whole time that Ishmael secretly watches Queequeg in the hotel room, he is looking at him with from a point of superiority. Since Queequeg is the person from out of the country, in Ishmael's eyes,

Queequeg is the one who needs to explain his way of living to him. Ishmael has does not have to explain how and why he does things because he feels like he is the normal, civilized one while Queequeg is the abnormal foreigner.

As Ishmael lives on the Pequod with a myriad of different people and his relationship with Queequeg grows, he begins to question the ideas surrounding white supremacy. The imperialistic nature of Western nations relies heavily on the notion that white culture is superior to other cultures; it is more civilized, more technologically advanced, and serves as a model of every country should be. It is deemed almost as morally right to colonize countries belonging to dark skinned people because Western culture has something to offer them; a monotheistic religion, industrialisation, clothing, and “ civilized” mannerisms. Not only does white supremacy promote the idea that white culture itself is superior, it also relies on the “ science” of eugenics to prove white people are biologically better than darker skinned individuals. Countering the views promoted by eugenics, when examining Queequeg’s appearance, Ishmael draws comparison to George Washington.

“ Whether it was, too, that his head being shaved, his forehead was drawn out in freer and brighter relief, and looked more expansive than it otherwise would, this I will not venture to decide; but certain it was his head was phrenologically an excellent one. It may seem ridiculous, but it reminded me of General Washington’s head, as seen in the popular busts of him. It had the same long regularly graded retreating slope from above the brows, which were likewise very projecting, like two long promontories thickly wooded on top. Queequeg was George Washington cannibalistically developed.”

Since eugenics heavily focuses on the physiological make up of people of different races to prove superiority, Ishmael comparing Queequeg to one of the highest regarded American men in history, George Washington, is unexpected from a white man living in a time when this science is widely accepted as fact. Ishmael is able to demonstrate his introspective nature on the topic of race throughout the book. He indicates many times in the novel that he believes Queequeg's culture is inferior to his own; yet Ishmael is still able to question why he feels they way he does and challenge the ideas perpetuated by inherently racist parts of American society. His ability to do so increases as he spends more time on the Pequod.

In the novel, through the interactions among the members of the Pequod, Melville is able to highlight the irony that can be found in white supremacy. One of most outstanding ironies being that while Americans love to consume black culture, they still claim that the people creating it are inferior. When the crew want to pass time by partying and dancing, they call on Pip to play music on his tamborine. The men continue to make outright racist remarks about dark skinned people on the ship as a storm approaches them. One of the Spanish sailors says, " Aye, harpooneer, thy race is the undeniable dark side of mankind—devilish dark at that. No offence." The irony of the sailors enjoying listening to Pip's music yet still regarding him as not only inferior, but evil, seems to be lost on the men.

Throughout Moby Dick, the relation between race and American culture is examined. Ishmael's narration as a white man living in a time of rampant racial tension and white supremacy offers a vital perspective. The Pequod

serves as a model of a multicultural society on a small scale. In this small community Ishmael is forced to reflect on his feelings of superiority and challenge these beliefs he has been taught to hold. Melville uses the story of Ishmael and the Pequod to expose the irony and contradictions found in white supremacist ideology in ways that the characters are often oblivious to.