This commentary will argue that the political, social and historical context of *Moby Dick* (1851), specifically the presence of varied attitudes on race and ethnicity in the United States and the ongoing formation of an American self, dictates and influences the establishment of Ishmael and Queequeg’s relationship in chapter ten, “A Bosom Friend”. While Melville does not make the ethnicity of either character obvious, Ishmael’s observation that “As we were going along the people stared... at seeing him and me upon such confidential terms”(Page 50), gives the relationship the social equivalence of that between a white and black man. Though instances such as Bildad’s dismissive attitude in offering only the “Seven hundredth and seventy-seventh”(66) lay, suggest that Ishmael himself may be black, the argument is undermined by neither captain, nor anyone else, referring to his ethnicity. Consequentially, his deliberation over Queequeg’s personality and general level of humanity is a fascinating reflection of white American attitudes toward ethnicity in this period.

In 1820, Thomas Jefferson summarised the argument for abolishing slavery as “Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other”(Brogan, 288). Such a viewpoint is misleading as it presents slavery as an issue of economics against morality, hiding the deeper racial divides which afflicted the North even after every state had confirmed their abolition. Ishmael views Queequeg as simple and childlike in a manner which reflects another Jefferson belief, that “in reason they[non-whites] are much inferior to the whites” and “in imagination they are dull, tasteless and anomalous”. While Queequeg is most likely ethnically Polynesian, rather than African, the attitudes exhibited towards him are intertwined with those held against African-Americans, as all non-whites were considered
socially backward, simple and, to a greater or lesser extent, savage, by a series of
preconceptions which had infiltrated the American consciousness.

On joining Queequeg at the Inn in “A Bosom Friend”, Ishmael assesses that “He
never heeded my presence” and “appeared wholly occupied with counting the pages of the
marvellous book”(43). Melville certainly doesn’t present his narrator as having the same
malicious nature to his comments as Jefferson, but the similarity is nevertheless striking, as
he observes Queequeg’s cultural difference in a racially influenced manner, noting his
simplicity and implying his stupidity, as he is naively unable to count the book’s pages, let
alone read it. Ishmael likes and respects Queequeg, but from the very beginning their
relationship is intrinsically defined by the social preconception that he is lacking in both
reason and imagination, as he is drawn immediately to the most basic qualities. He wants
to judge without prejudice, but his conclusion that “Queequeg is my fellow man”(45) and
thus acceptable to worship alongside, is reached only after deconstructing his initial
assumptions. Ishmael sees “the traces of a simple honest heart”(43), but certainly had “no
doubt he had never heard there was such a thing as that[Philosophy]”(44). By highlighting
Queequeg’s simplicity, Ishmael underlines an inability to escape from the racial prejudices
of his nation when forming his opinion, as he observes Queequeg like he would an animal
or child, only able to engage in more common social civility after concluding that
“Christian kindness has proved but hollow courtesy”(44) to him so far.

Ishmael does however, begin to adapt his thinking to question the ideas of
difference in his white, Christian society, exploring the interweaving and interconnected
nature of the savage and civilised in Moby-Dick. Many of the traits he sees in Queequeg
are fundamental to Melville’s ideals of what constitutes America and being American,
which he explores in the novel. This is most apparent when Ishmael states that Queequeg had “a spirit that would dare a thousand devils”(43). Here Melville is highlighting the importance of character and strength of mind in the pioneering tradition of the America he is attempting to convey. As the country moved away from colonialism, battled with slavery and dealt with immigration, the pioneering attitude inspired by events such as the California Gold Rush of 1848(Brogan, Page 230) created a respect for original and revolutionary actions and attitudes that necessitated a certain strength and resilience. Long before Hoover’s rugged individualism, America began to value rugged individuals. By focusing on Queequeg’s character and self-certainty, Ishmael is giving him as a great a praise as such a character could. Ishmael believes that “so soon as I hear that such a man gives himself out for a philosopher... he must have ‘broken his digester’”(44), indicating an opinion that self-assurance and assertiveness are far more valuable than scholastic abilities and academic success. Despite initially noticing the simplicities of Queequeg, by evaluating these characteristics Ishmael realises, as he “felt a melting”(44), that Queequeg is not uncomplicated but rather focused and determined, with a logical, resolute air, and “a nature in which there lurked no civilised hypocrisies and bland deceits”(44).

Interestingly, Ishmael states that “Queequeg was George Washington cannibalistically developed”(43). Such a thought could relate directly to the aforementioned preconceptions in American society, as he believes Queequeg would be as revered and successful as George Washington, were it not for his ethnicity. However, Ishmael’s remark is most likely the beginning of his unravelling of the fixed social notions which cloud his judgement. Through also saying “his head was phrenologically an excellent one”(43), he compares Queequeg and George Washington on the most basic levels. Both have strong head shapes and characters, and both, to Ishmael, carry and air of
the pioneering American spirit he deems so valuable, and so accurately epitomised by whaling.

Ishmael’s deliberation over Queequeg, his overcoming and understanding of his own initial judgements and his eventual accepting of God’s most basic instructions mirrors the social progress America made from slavery, to the Civil rights Act of 1965. The uncomplicated notion of one man shaking off prejudice ideas, to an extent gives the chapter a melancholic air; while it takes no time for the two to become “a cosy, loving pair”(46), it is obvious to the reader that a national change in attitude is significantly more complicated. At no point in this chapter does Ishmael show any animosity toward Queequeg, that has already passed, but he is still forced to contend with preconceived ideas about the simplicity and unpredictability of non-whites. While he says “savages are strange beings; at times you do not know how to take them”(44), it eventually dawns on him that Queequeg, as an individual and “fellow man”(45), is in fact a manifestation of Melville’s modern America.
 Works Cited
