

The North Water Study Guide

The North Water by Ian McGuire

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Plot Summary

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The North Water by Ian McGuire, a historical fiction/thriller, is told from an omniscient narrator focusing on the point of view of a ship's surgeon, Patrick Sumner, who is the protagonist. After leaving India where he had been stationed by the British colonial health system during a time of great unrest, Sumner signs up for a stint with the *Volunteer*, a sealing/whaling ship whose mission is to collect as much blubber and seal fur as possible for the European energy markets.

The surgeon hoards a good supply of drugs with the goal of enjoying a chemical holiday while he writes poetry in a kind of blissed-out escape from reality.

Sumner has no inkling that what he really has done is throw his lot in with professional criminals who intend to scuttle the ship in the north waters off England and collect the maritime insurance. He also has no idea that he will be in the company of murderers, rapists, psychopaths, and social misfits. What he hopes will be a kind of paid vacation turns out to be a fierce struggle for survival against the harsh northern elements as well as the schemes of the crew.

The author creates a perfect pressure-cooker setting for this violent story by using all male primary characters, with the one exception of an Eskimo wife who is loaned as a kind of chattel by an Eskimo man to Sumner when he lives for a time among the natives. But the mood throughout is icy. There is only the harshness of the arctic environment, ice, snow, seals and desperate men. This apocalyptic scenario is punctuated by two murders committed by Drax, who is clearly the villain in this tale.

In one instance, Drax rapes and kills a young deckhand and stuffs his body in a shipping crate; in another he cripples Captain Brownlee in a savage and largely unprovoked attack.

To an extent, the legitimate sealing and whaling operations of the *Volunteer* conflict with herding and hunting practices by local Eskimo tribes. The Europeans maintain a delicate balance with the indigenous people by trading in furs, rifles and other goods. The Eskimos treat the interlopers with a thin veneer of tolerance that covers a deeper suspicion of their methods and motives.

A secondary theme is Sumner's struggle with an addiction to laudanum (morphine), which may have played a role in his departure from India. His primary antagonist is a crusty and depraved old sea dog named Henry Drax who lives by his own laws and is devoid of any human warmth or compassion. Drax conspires with Jacob Baxter, an agent for the insurance company, to sink the *Volunteer* and take as many crew members to their deaths as possible to eliminate witnesses who may testify in subsequent legal actions in London.



Once the ship is scuttled and the surviving crew creates makeshift shelters for themselves, they are rescued by another ship heading back to England. Sumner lands in Lerwick and makes his way to a suburb of London where he hopes to find Baxter so he can collect his unpaid wages. When he finds Baxter, Sumner realizes that Drax has already returned to England and is living with Baxter as his servant and co-conspirator.

In a surprising twist, Sumner turns the tables on both Drax and Baxter when he disrupts their plan to kill him in the dark of night at the docks to prevent him from unmasking their conspiracy. Drax pursues Sumner across the docks until Sumner hides in a small shed. When Drax enters with his gun in hand, Sumner attacks him with a large ice saw and nearly decapitates him. Sumner then collects his wages, and returns by train to London.



Chapters 1-5

Summary

Harpoonist Henry Drax drinks in a dockside bar in Chapter 1 and tries to con the bartender into giving him another drink by a toss of the coin, while he passes the time until the whaling ship *Volunteer* departs for the waters of the Arctic for seal hunting. Drax, a coarse and profane man, finds a young black homeless boy named Albert Stubbs and offers him food and drink. They find a dark and obscure corner of the midnight dock where Drax hits the boy until he is nearly unconscious. Drax then pulls down the boy's pants and brutally sodomizes him.

Before their departure at daybreak, Captain Arthur Brownlee of the *Volunteer* quizzes Sumner as he considers him for a spot in the crew in Chapter 2. Sumner is a ship's surgeon who is down on his luck, another Englishman in search of a paycheck. Sumner explains that he left India where he had been stationed because of a Pashtun uprising and an inheritance he received from an Irish uncle. Brownlee hires Sumner but tells him it has been his experience that crew usually do not ask for help when they are sick.

Sumner takes inventory of the so-called medicine chest in his cabin, finds it woefully inadequate, and makes a list of necessary items so they can be bought before the ship leaves port. In Chapter 4, Sumner visits an apothecary to pick up some simple over-the-counter nostrums. Then he asks directions from a beggar in the town square. They chat a bit, and then Sumner asks the man why he is missing both legs. The beggar—named Ort Caper—ominously tells Sumner to ask Captain Brownlee of the *Volunteer* what happened to his legs.

Somewhat rattled by the beggar's questions, Sumner convinces himself that serving as ship's surgeon cannot be any worse, and probably better, than his situation in India. Sumner looks forward to a leisurely voyage of mostly reading and writing. When the *Volunteer* reaches Lerwick, Scotland Captain Brownlee goes into town to pick up the Shetland Islanders who will join the crew of the *Volunteer*. Meanwhile, Drax, Cavendish, and Sumner row a small dinghy dockside to test the town's distillery output.

The men stop at a brothel where Sumner and Black do not patronize the local prostitutes. Drax is the first to come downstairs after his frolic and declares, "For a shilling I've had worse" (34). The rest of the men emerge and join the general dance with other prostitutes and their clients. After a few drinks, Drax picks a fight with another man at the bar but is restrained by his fellow crewmen.

Back on the ship, Drax discovers a set of keys in the coat pocket of the intoxicated Sumner and uses them to open the foot locker in his cabin, where he discovers a large envelope with tattered Army discharge papers, some Indian currency, and a gold ring. He shows it to Cavendish and then replaces the items in the locked trunk and returns it to its original spot.



After nursing their hangovers, the men join the rest of the crew in departing Lerwick, outfitted with rifles and knives to hunt the main seal pack which they spot on the second day. In Chapter 5 Captain Brownlee estimates he and his crew can gather between 30 and 50 tons of blubber, based on the size of the pack. If they harvest 40 tons of blubber oil, their value would be about 360 pounds, or roughly \$14,000.

Faced with stiff competition from Scottish, Norwegian, English, and Dutch whaling vessels, Brownlee decides to send out a fifth boat in the morning. The men anchor their rowboats to a patch of ice, disembark, and begin shooting their rifles. They kill three adult seals and six infants before the herd begins to scatter in different directions. As the killing gets more fervid, Sumner disengages and thinks of the five bottles of laudanum (opium) stashed away inside his medical chest "like soldiers on parade" (42). Sumner has already become addicted and takes a strong shot of the painkiller each evening after dinner. Sumner falls into the frigid, frozen water and bobs up and down several times because of the heavy burden of equipment he carries. He struggles to get onto the ice but instead sinks deeper into the water.

Analysis

In these early chapters, the author sets up a positive framework against which the later action seems like a descent into hell. In the opening of the story there is a sunlit, carefree mood that seems to bode well for all connected to the Volunteer. The author begins this story in a spirit of adventure on the high seas, not unlike the way most people would approach a new venture—with enthusiasm, hope, and a sense of fun.

The reader is also put on notice that appearances are not always reality and that there is an inner darkness to the story yet to be revealed.

Following his rather delusional daydreams of a peaceful and pleasant world, protagonist Patrick Sumner signs on as ship's surgeon to a whaling vessel headed for the North Water. Sumner also has somewhat of a literary bent. He brings volumes of classical poetry and a notebook to write about his experiences. The British physician has no idea of the reality of what he has done until he meets Captain Brownlee. As a buffer against his feelings of disgust about what he endured in India as a colonial physician and what he experiences on the whaling journey, Sumner uses laudanum to ease his psychological pain. He does not face the full implications of what is afoot on the Volunteer until his supply of morphine is exhausted and he lives in the company of Eskimos later in the book.

This raises the question of whether Sumner is really an addict and the extent to which this disease may influence his desire to become a whaling crewman. As long as he has access to laudanum, the physician can cope but when he has no more the full horror of his situation becomes clear. Sumner comes across as a decent, if misdirected, Englishman who sees his maritime adventure as an extended holiday perhaps, and a flight from reality. Sumner, metaphorically, is like a vessel that sails calmly in fine weather until it suddenly encounters foul weather and is thrust into a desperate struggle



for survival. For the reader, Sumner provides a flawed but human touchstone—or reference point—against which to measure some of the depraved conduct that he encounters on the high seas.

When Sumner falls through the ice into the frigid arctic waters, it is a metaphor for his loss of control and identity that threatens his existence. It is also a rather obvious trope based on the notion of having cold water thrown on one's face.

Sumner's encounter with the legless beggar strikes an ominous note when the man tells him to ask Captain Brownlee how he lost his limbs. Although the question never gets asked, the answer becomes apparent to Sumner once he is aboard the *Volunteer* and sees with his own eyes what a violent and unstable man the captain is.

Discussion Question 1

What does the reader learn about Patrick Sumner's past in the first chapters of the novel? How does Sumner's past influence his decision to join the crew of the *Volunteer*?

Discussion Question 2

Is there an obvious protagonist and antagonist at this point? Is the protagonist flawed? If so, what are some of his flaws?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Sumner not follow up on the beggar's suggestion he should ask Brownlee about how he lost both legs? What do you think this exchange foreshadows?

Vocabulary

gaggle, mizzenmast, cooperage, bathetic, pong, mottled, skiving, ferocity, compunction, quizzical, gainful, tragacanth, lancet, tableau, vitriol, cadaver, taffrail, omen, noisome, undulant, adamantine, flense, harrowed, purlieu



Chapters 6-10

Summary

Black discovers the nearly-frozen Sumner wedged between two ice floes—inert, white, and seemingly dead in Chapter 6. Black places his rope around Sumner's chest and pulls up him onto the ice. Repeated slaps across the face finally elicit a single, flickering eyelid. Black fires his rifle twice into the air and soon Otto and two other crewmen arrive to help. The four of them lug Sumner back to the ship, where he is hoisted to the deck with block and tackle and laid out like one of the marine mammals that sustain the Volunteer.

The rescuers carry Sumner below deck where they cut off his frozen clothing and put him close to the stove. They slather his naked skin with goose fat and cover him in hot towels. Sumner is still alive, but in a coma. After several hours, they give him a sip of brandy which he vomits up with a dollop of brown blood. To a question from Black, Sumner shakes his head "no" to indicate he cannot talk. When Sumner appears alert, Black tells him he was in the frozen sea water for three hours—something no "normal" man could survive. Eventually, Sumner accepts a few swallows of bouillon and asks for laudanum to numb his pain.

After gingerly imbibing the laudanum with rum, Sumner is near delirium and is disoriented. He shakes violently and begins to weep. Throughout the night, under a pile of bear skins, Sumner sleeps, awakens, sleeps as his "opiated mind slips its moorings and drifts" (51) back to the fighting in India and the stench of close combat: blood, vomit, beer, urine, gunsmoke and sweat. The spirits of the men are lifted after a successful seal slaughter and they sail in good weather. Sumner regains a healthy color and vigor, along with a good appetite. He makes notes about the bird life, the shifting weather, and the ship's progress as they approach Cape Farewell.

In Chapter 8, Sumner also chats with Otto, the German harpoonist who is "a deep thinker [with] a speculative, mystic bent" (71). Otto tells Sumner he believes while he was caught in the ice and in a coma, Sumner's soul slipped out of his body and traveled to higher planes of consciousness.

The Volunteer becomes mired in the sea ice and several men, including Drax, are dispatched in rowboats to help free the ship. The men in the work boat see a bear and her cub, try to shoot it, but only wound the beast that slips into the water with her baby. Suddenly, she rises up and attacks the boat, sinking her teeth into the oarsman's right shoulder. The bear thrashes her head about and rips off the man's right arm. Drax grabs the boat's spade and drives it into the bear's back, splintering her spine. He then pulls the spade out and sinks it into the bear's heart.

The men pull the wounded, screaming oarsman aboard the boat and use whale line to tourniquet his bloody stump. The arm itself is still lodged in the mother bear's teeth, and



the cub swims in circles around its mother's corpse. The men tie a line around the adult bear and haul it painfully to the ship. During this operation, the mauled oarsman dies of his injuries.

Men who present themselves for medical care to Sumner for everything from broken bones to diarrhea have a sense that he is nearly godlike in his abilities to heal and help; Sumner, on the other hand, sees his patients mostly as bodies or body parts that need repair. In Chapter 8, Sumner sees himself as "a medical man, not a priest or magistrate or spouse" (79). One day, the boy Joseph Hanna visits Sumner and complains of a stomachache. Sumner palpates his abdomen but the boy cannot, or will not, identify a specific region of pain. A closer examination of his rectal area shows signs of ulceration and the anal sphincter is distorted and torn in some areas.

Hanna will not respond to Sumner's questions about who sodomized him, probably out of fear the surgeon surmises. Sumner reports the incident to Captain Brownlee, who summons the youth to his cabin. When the captain asks Hanna who injured him, he says the injuries were an "accident." Sumner takes exception and says they could have occurred only by one means—sodomy. Brownlee instructs the men that any discussion of the matter is prohibited and the case is closed.

Drax stops to see Sumner for a cut on the hand; the surgeon applies a bandage and tells Drax to keep it on his hand for a few days. Drax tells Sumner that Hanna is "a well-known liar" (90) and should not be trusted. Sumner says the incident, according to the captain, is closed.

By June, the ship reaches the North Water. Sumner, dozing in his cabin, is in Chapter 9 awakened by the noise and excitement of a whale hunt. He sees the whale get stabbed by an impaling iron and descend only to resurface a mile away. Harpoons hanging from its flesh, the whale comes up very close to the boat with Otto onboard. The whale turns on its back and the men jump on to butcher the creature, removing blubber in great strips and then cutting off the tail, nose, fins, and jaw. After four hours working in the oily, bloody waters, the crew returns and enjoys a drink of rum provided by Captain Brownlee.

The next day, the weather is clear and calm but there are no whales. In Chapter 10, Captain Brownlee orders the crew to start filling the casks with blubber for their departure. This requires the removal and emptying of the lowest casks stored in the hold as ballast water. As Otto removes the casks, he finds one that is heavier than usual. When he cannot open the drainage spout, he attacks the casks with a hammer to remove the head. As he does so, Otto peers inside the cask as its water drains out and sees "curled up inside it, part submerged in the remnants of the ballast water, like some monstrous fugal knottage, bred and nurtured in the fetid petri of the hold, the torn, dead, and naked body of Joseph Hanna, cabin boy" (99).



Analysis

To fully discover the author's intention, the reader is challenged to endure some horrendous scenes of violence in *The North Water*. It is as if the author tries to desensitize the reader to some degree as he piles on ever more depravity in his search for what is truly good and what is unquestionably evil in human nature. The answer is that life itself is neither good nor evil but a continual struggle to exist based on instincts.

Sumner experiences two episodes that foreshadow the kind of troubles he will face as a whaler. The first of these is his largely symbolic dunking in the arctic waters when he slips between two ice floes and nearly drowns or freezes. This is a life-threatening moment that coincides with his growing realization that something is basically flawed about the situation on the *Volunteer*. The second is the eerie way in which it comes to light that Joseph Hanna has been sodomized by Henry Drax. By this time, however, Sumner has no options for escape other than the laudanum he uses whenever possible.

Violence continues at every turn: the horrific encounter with the bear, Sumner's near-death experience of falling through the ice, the sexual assault and murder of Joseph Hanna. The result of these catastrophes is a spreading contagion of fear among the *Volunteer* crew. What began as a search for seals turns into a desperate struggle for survival against the arctic weather, the Eskimo hunters, and especially among the crew. Probably because of the rising tide of violence, the crew begins to look to Sumner for stability and rationality.

Many of these men were desperate before joining the *Volunteer* crew but the multiple adversities seem to drive them even further toward the law of the jungle—eat or be eaten.

The mother bear, following her maternal instincts, bites off the arm of one of the crew. Drax, following his instincts of fear, converts that fear to rage and uses its energy to kill the bear. The reader is left to ponder how these instincts play out in everyday, "civilized" society where a threat to survival can be a pink slip rather than a shovel plunged into the spine.

The encounter with the bear is a metaphorical encounter with the wild, untamed, unpredictable forces of nature. A creature that has had to fight to survive becomes tougher and wilier. The same applies to Drax, who unleashes a torrent of violence against the mother bear that is astonishing and shocking in its brutality. This is another signal to the reader that the author intends to take his tale to the core of existence and to find in the struggle for survival what makes life so precious.

Discussion Question 1

How does Drax attempt to deflect blame from himself for the rape and murder of Joseph Hanna? What does this tell readers about his character?



Discussion Question 2

How does Sumner distance himself emotionally from the violence and sickness aboard the ship? What does this suggest about his character?

Discussion Question 3

How does the plight of the mother bear come to symbolize the fate of the men aboard the Volunteer?

Vocabulary

rampant, greatcoat, irrevocable, ordnance, claggy, suture, arrowroot, charpoy, sepoy, pariah, shamiana, ghee, recommence, encroachment, cheroot, melancholic, assonant, understudy, ptarmigan, nullity, mattock, prototype, gargantuan, hemorrhoid, dank, flume, forecastle, haak, foreganger



Chapters 11-15

Summary

The boy's body is carried to the mess cabin so Sumner can examine it. He notes a ring of bruises on Hanna's neck, an indication he was strangled. Captain Brownlee says whoever committed the crime will be found, chained, and returned to England to be tried for child murder. A general sense of outrage sweeps over the already-agitated crew who shout for revenge and justice. "He should be whipped down to the fucking bone," one of the men proclaims. Brownlee promises: "I will find the man who did this and see the bastard hanged. That is a certainty" (102).

Brownlee and Sumner debate whether the perpetrator of the murder might be insane or afflicted with some kind of brain disease. Brownlee says he will interview each man individually, once the ship is underway again. "I am a whaling man, but this is not whaling, Mr. Sumner," Brownlee says (104). "This is not whaling I can assure you of that" (104).

Sumner and Otto have an existential discussion on the nature of good and evil. Otto says evil is the absence of good and Sumner cannot understand why anyone would kill a child. Otto says the answer to such questions does not lie within the reach of words. But Sumner protests that language is all we humans have that separates us from the beasts. He says he would rather not ponder such questions, but his brain will not allow it even though it would be "pleasanter and easier."

As discussion of the murder occupies conversation at mess in Chapter 12. McKendrick says he suspects Drax as the murderer, and Brownlee tells him he would better be able to back up that notion with some facts when he presents the case to the maritime commission for criminal investigation. Meanwhile, oddly, Drax announces that he has no interest in young boys and therefore could not be the culprit. The whispering campaign against McKendrick picks up steam in Chapter 13 and soon he is tried and convicted in the court of public opinion on the ship.

On orders from Captain Brownlee, McKendrick is chained in the forehold and forced into the equivalent of solitary confinement where he eats, sleeps, and eliminates himself alone. It is not too long before McKendrick is treated like the monstrosity and pervert many believe he is without so much as a trial or summation of facts in the case. A discussion between crewman Campbell and Captain Brownlee reveals in Chapter 13 that the two have a nefarious plan to take advantage of the unpredictable winter weather to pull off an insurance fraud. They plan to sail the ship into Pond's Bay before it is completely closed by ice and scuttle the ship so it appears the crew was caught off-guard by weather conditions and unable to save the Volunteer.

Brownlee tells Campbell it is good they have already packed some blubber in the hold so it will appear that the ship and its crew have been diligently working their trade and



minding their own business. However, Brownlee cannot shake the heaviness of the situation, although he does not consciously connect that to guilt feelings about the kangaroo court besmirching of McKendrick or his own involvement in another crime.

In Chapter 14, Sumner asks McKendrick to grip and tighten his thumbs around his arm; he can feel the pressure of four fingers but not the thumb. McKendrick says he has no strength in one thumb because of a previous accident. Sumner realizes that fact exonerates McKendrick as the killer of the Hanna boy since there were two distinct thumb bruises on the youth's throat that could not have been made by McKendrick; the surgeon hastens to report the finding to Captain Brownlee.

The captain seems to resist the logical conclusion that McKendrick could not have been the murderer. "A scrawny cunt like Hanna can be strangled with one hand easy enough, I'd say," Brownlee proclaims (123). Brownlee is obsessed with the plan to scuttle his ship and does not want to be bothered with the subtleties of a criminal investigation. Sumner shows the captain the sketches he made in his notebook of the boy's body, clearly showing the thumbprints, and restates that McKendrick does not have the use of one thumb.

"Its most likely Henry Drax," the surgeon replies (124). "He's lying about the carpenter [McKendrick] to save himself" (124). Sumner does a cursory exam of Drax in the nude, and notices nothing too unusual except for the fact Drax has lice on his penis foreskin. When Drax dresses, Brownlee notices a swollen infection on his upper arm. Sumner goes to get a lancet from his medicine chest, pierces the infection and notices a hard lump. He pries it out of Drax's arm and realizes it is a child's tooth.

Drax whelps Brownlee in the head with a whalebone, then Black appears at the cabin door with a shotgun blast. He threatens to unload the second barrel into Drax unless he surrenders. With a shrug, Drax relents in Chapter 15 and says he has no idea how the tooth became lodged in his arm. Brownlee, meanwhile, retires to his cabin for four days and nights to nurse the wounds caused by Drax's assault. Sumner, after inspecting the captain's head, fears the injuries will be fatal. From his battlefield experience in India, Sumner knows the progression from skull fracture to unconsciousness to catatonia accompanied by delirium, followed by madness and death.

Crewman Cavendish announces he will serve as captain until Brownlee recovers and orders Henry Drax chained in the hold until the ship returns to England. Brownlee dies within a few days and is given a burial at sea. Otto pulls Sumner aside and whispers his fear that "Cavendish will kill us all," because of a dream revelation (137). Sumner dismisses the dream as "nothing but a shite pile, a rag and bone shop of ideas" that he should dismiss from his mind (137).

Sumner takes charge of caring for a captured black bear cub the men have snatched off the ice. When the cook throws a sizzling piece of bacon on the deck, both the bear cub and the ship's pet Airedale lunge for it and crash into each other. The bear cub handily dispatches the bacon, and then looks about for more, to the great amusement of the crew.



Analysis

There is a striking similarity between the way opinion on the Volunteer shapes up against McKendrick as the killer of Hanna, and the Salem witch trials of an earlier day or Nazi show trials of more recent times. All are a kind of crowd hysteria driven by fear and the perceived need for control. All are also marked by their stunning ignorance and cruelty. There is no evidence against McKendrick, until Sumner reveals the exculpatory fact that McKendrick could not have left the kind of thumbprints seen on Hanna's throat. Before he is suspected, though, Henry Drax coolly manipulates these fears in the direction of McKendrick. This is another example of the psychopathic, ruthless behavior of which Drax is capable.

At this point in the narrative, crew and captain alike demand some control over the situation to allay their fears for personal safety. Captain Brownlee, like a good witch hunter, has McKendrick bound and shackled in the hold without anything resembling a trial or any real facts other than an accusation by Henry Drax, the actual murderer. Unbeknownst to the crew, Drax and Jacob Baxter, the shipping company's insurance broker, are fellow conspirators to sink the ship and try to collect insurance coverage. Quite rapidly, the Hanna murder makes everyone except Drax feel threatened.

Desperate to make some sense of the murder, Sumner asks Otto what could possibly be a justification or rationale for killing a child. Otto replies that there are no answers to most of the really important questions: "Words are like toys; they amuse us and educate us but when we come to manhood we should give them up" (105). But Sumner strongly disagrees: "Words are all we have. If we give them up, we're no better than the beasts" (105).

The author's point here is that, while in certain basic ways all life is alike, it is the human's mind, language, and ability to reason that sets man apart from the beasts and at the same time imposes a higher moral and ethical standard. We are creatures capable of good or evil; as humans we must choose the good. When Drax implicates McKendrick in the boy's murder, McKendrick replies by telling Captain Brownlee that Drax was a cannibal when he sailed aboard the Dolly in the South Seas.

With no means of verification, these charges and counter-charges seem like the schoolyard taunts of children. And this is an effective way for the author to make the point that the crew seem to be devolving into a more primitive state the longer they are at sea. The flip side of this process is an increase in violence.

Discussion Question 1

What does the way McKendrick is so quickly decided upon as the murderer tell us about the crew and the time period?



Discussion Question 2

What is the net effect of the murder, suspicions, violence, and change of command on the crew of the Volunteer?

Discussion Question 3

How is order restored after fighting breaks out among the men? What role does Cavendish play?

Vocabulary

calamitous, arse, proclivity, unrobust, bollocks, slurry, dispiriting, fistic, ulcerated, panoply, scaffold, voluptuousness, incision, pommel, shrapnel, catatonia, bamboozle, idiosyncrasy, moot, machination, coagulation, laudanum, imprecation



Chapters 16-20

Summary

After it enters the sound, the Volunteer is anchored to the southern tip of the exposed land mass, and Cavendish orders the crew to begin erection of hand-powered ice saws. Eight crewmen are required for the upward thrust of the steel blade and another four to execute the downward cut. As the men labor in Chapter 16, Cavendish keeps an eye on the advancing ice sheet that threatens to freeze everyone and everything in its path.

One of the men sets off gunpowder explosions under the ice to clear the ship's path to the dock. Once the path is cleared, the men tug the ship into its ice harbor and anchor it to the ice floe. Sumner takes tea and laudanum during a break as the thunderous sound of ice floes joining together splits the northern sky. Once the ship is locked into place, by design, Cavendish orders the men to remove whatever survival gear they can find and to fly the inverted ensign as a sign of distress.

Shirtless, wearing a filthy peacoat, and smelling of piss, with his wrists still manacled, Drax is freed from his chains in the hold and allowed on deck. Cavendish and Drax exchange insults as the captain reestablishes that he is in command and the crewman is still a murder suspect. Drax tells the captain the ship is not sinking, as he planned, but that with an axe he could ensure that it goes down. "You kill Brownlee with a walking stick, and you honestly think I'm going to gift you a fucking axe?" Cavendish says (147).

The ship pitches forward and begins to sink in Chapter 17. Cavendish orders the crew to salvage the rigging, masts, and sails. He hikes four miles to where the Hastings, another whaling ship, is moored and returns with the news that Captain Campbell has offered to take the crew aboard. The crew begins moving their supplies at once. Sumner awakens from a nap and finds Drax peering at him; the sight, even though Drax is manacled, is alarming and frightening. Sumner tells Drax he has no conscience and Drax replies that he just does whatever pleases him. Sumner concludes that talking to Drax is like "shouting into the blackness and expecting the blackness to answer back in kind" (152).

While Sumner is double-checking to see that his medicines have been properly stored and are ready for transport, Cavendish appears and tells him he must kill the bear because he cannot be dragged across the ice and he is just another unwanted mouth to feed. The men release the bear on the ice and Sumner takes a rifle to shoot it, but he can't kill the creature he has been feeding and caring for. He hands the rifle to Otto, who takes careful aim just as the bear bounds over the snow and out of sight. That night, the men are jolted from sleep as the ice floe on which they are sleeping is thrust violently upward by the storm.

By morning the storm has passed, but Otto hands his binoculars to Cavendish with the admonition that the Hastings—their rescue vessel—has gone, mostly likely to escape



being crushed in the melee of icebergs adrift in the winds. Cavendish reassures the crew that the Hastings will return because its captain knows their location. Otto says there are no other whaling boats in the area that could take them aboard.

The stress causes a fight to break out, and several men are badly injured. Bannon, "a loose-eyed Shetlander with silver hoops in his ears," grabs a barrel and charges forward into the fight but Cavendish aims his rifle at his throat and fires (161). The bullet dislodges a sizeable piece of his skull which hits the pitched canvas roof of the tent leaving a huge bloody spot speckled with fresh brain tissue.

Cavendish warns his men that he will tolerate no fighting and that they will hike 100 miles to Pond's Bay in the morning where they will find the Hastings or another ship that can take them.

By morning, in Chapter 18, Sumner is deathly seasick, retching and defecating over the side of the rowboat as he comes to the realization that their best chances for rescue are gone. As this realization spreads, some men weep, others pray, and Otto checks his sextant readings against the charts. Otto tells Cavendish they are likely to reach Pond's Bay before nightfall where they can find another boat. And, sure enough, they do see the outline of another ship and its plume of smoke, but it is headed in the other direction.

As night approaches, they stop at a piece of headland and raise their tent on a gravel beach. Cavendish orders the men to break up one of the rowboats onshore and set it afire to summon help. The flames, light and heat of the fire momentarily raise the men's spirits. Cavendish figures their odds of survival through the winter by listing the various food sources: seals, foxes, loons, auk, and any other kinds of bird.

The men generate heat by burning driftwood from the wreck of the Hastings as well as bags of coal from the Volunteer. Sumner sees a cycle of fear, despair, and paralysis grip the men as they fully realize the fact that winter is fast approaching. In Chapter 19 the men break up the whaling boats to burn for warmth, and they can scarcely sleep despite great piles of blankets and animal skins. Sumner and Cavendish see a potential survival threat in the passivity and inactivity of the men, so they divide them into equal groups to serve rotating watch and foraging shifts while the other group rests.

Cavendish suggests that he and Sumner bargain with the aboriginals to trade guns for seals. This they accomplish by gestures toward the tent, allowing the Yaks to fire a rifle and marks in the snow to indicate 12 seals for one rifle. The Eskimos rub out six of the marks with their boots, and the exchange is made while Cavendish calls them "gouging ice-nigger bastards" (176).

That night Drax uses a long metal file to whittle at his restraints until he is finally free. Then he reenters the tent and uses the sharp end of the file to impale an older sleeping crew member in the neck; he then takes his clothing and wraps himself against the cold. Drax goes outside into the darkness and begins to harness the dogs to the sled.



Cavendish, alerted by the commotion, approaches Drax who yanks his jaw upwards and gashes his throat with a blubber knife.

When the crewmen awaken in the early, dark dawn they discover the three bodies in the tent, then the bodies of the two Yaks also murdered by Drax in Chapter 20. In the absence of Cavendish, Otto becomes the 'de facto' leader and calls the men into the tent to offer prayer for their deceased comrades. Four men, impatient and frightened, depart the tent and strike out on their own in search of the Yak encampment. The remaining men, including Otto and Sumner, hope they will find and kill the escaped bear for food.

Sumner runs across the bear, loads his gun and fires but the rifle misfires. The bear makes off in a swirl of snow. Sumner, with a dogged determination, follows the bear.

Analysis

The transition of the bear adopted by Sumner from quasi-pet to potential menu item defines and symbolizes the desperation of the Volunteer crew. In the early hours and days of their struggle for survival after the sinking of their ship, their common threat becomes their common goal as they face the cruel inevitability of winter. But their poverty and fragility soon cause them to turn against each other. In such a situation, the usual polarities of right and wrong become scrambled and the kind of bloodthirsty murder that Drax commits on Cavendish seems almost justifiable. The law of the jungle is also the law of the arctic.

Underlying all this is fear—fear of death, fear of one's fellow man, fear of nature. The bleakness of the arctic winter reflects the iciness of the men's souls and their inability to help each other or to seek spiritual solace. Their predicament is emblematic of the condition of modern men in a materialistic society where survival depends mostly on the exercise of one's ego rather than reliance on a higher power.

In Chapter 17, Sumner gains insight into Drax's twisted character and sees that mental illness, or perhaps brain damage, is at the root of his murderous behavior. He awakens from a nap to find Drax's face only inches from his, although Drax is manacled and restrained by the blacksmith. Shocked, Sumner asks Drax how the injury on his arm is healing Drax brushes off his question and claims he has no idea how a tooth became lodged in his arm.

Drax says he has no remorse for killing Joseph Hanna, and adds "I'm a doer, not a thinker, me. I follow my inclination. One thing happens, then another comes after it. Why is the first thing more important than the second? Why is the second more important than the third?" (151).

Sumner feel himself growing slightly nauseated as he asks: "You recognize no authority at all then, no right or wrong beyond yourself?" (152). Drax shrugs.



The author in this exchange suggests that although crime and criminal behavior are evil because of their effects on other people, criminals may not themselves be evil people but rather men with a warped sense of reality because of either mental illness or a disastrous childhood, or a combination of both. This attitude would have been extremely forward-thinking at the time of the novel, but later would become a foundational idea in modern criminology and social work. Sumner concludes that it is impossible to reason with Drax.

Discussion Question 1

What happens in Chapters 16-20 to foster a sense of desperation among the surviving crew? How is this desperation related to the reader?

Discussion Question 2

How much of an influence on the mood of the men does the behavior of Henry Drax exert?

Discussion Question 3

Once a group of desperate men has passed over the line of civilized behavior into violence in the face of imminent danger, does this make it more difficult for them to revert to their previously orderly and lawful lives? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

swarf, abate, pungent, cantankerous, guttural, aforesaid, asynchronous, stelliferous, fauteuil, excarnation, epaulette, cheroot, lazar, chthonic, bole, gelid, hillocked, engravure, murmuration, ferric, calamity, dessicate, variegated, rime, funerary



Chapters 21-25

Summary

The bear slows to a walk, with Sumner trailing behind. In Chapter 21, the surgeon finally draws closer and the bear pauses. Sumner reloads the rifle, fires and kills the bear. Then he slices him open with a sharp blubber knife, thrusts his hands inside the bear's bloody carcass, and splashes the warm bear blood on himself. He tries to pray, but "instead of words what burbles from his brutalized mouth are inchoate grunts and gaspings of a savage" (203).

The Yaks discover Sumner, blood-spattered and half-dead, in the snow. They lift him into their sled and drag him back to their settlement where women give him water and heated seal blood to drink. In his delirious half-life, Sumner is aware that he has become a curiosity, or a possible omen, to the aboriginals who have saved him.

There is an English priest at the Inukitut village who gives Sumner brandy and rubs lard into his frostbite in Chapter 22. To the aboriginals he gives coffee and asks more questions. The frozen physician is unable to offer coherent responses because of his physical condition. One of the native women prepares food and offers it to Sumner, who is not really hungry but is getting a sense of what healthy hunger once felt like. The priest raises the back of Sumner's head and spoon feeds him broth and bits of meat. Sumner asks for the medicine chest and tells the priest he is searching for laudanum.

The priest tells Sumner he is lucky to have survived by crawling inside a bear's carcass and thus avoiding being frozen. The Eskimos prepare to go seal hunting, and invite Sumner to come along because they believe he will bring them good luck. Sumner neither encourages the Eskimos in their beliefs, nor accedes to the imprecations of the priest who tries to convert him to Christianity. That night Punnie, one of two wives of Urgang, offers herself sexually to Sumner and they continue having sex for the duration of his stay.

The priest falls ill and Sumner tells him he has an ulcerated or abscessed cecum and says he needs to lance his abdomen to let out the diseased tissue—which would be much less painful if he had any opium. Sumner finally tells the priest that he is a surgeon and plunges the lancet into his belly which releases a pint or more of bloody pus. Sumner cleans and closes the wound and washes his hands, telling the priest to rest.

Sumner is rescued by the crew of the Truelove whaling ship and taken to England. He stops in Lerwick to write a letter to Jacob Baxter in Hull, near London, with the whaling company, informing him that he will arrive soon to pick up his unpaid wages from the Volunteer. In Chapter 23, he finds Baxter in the pub he operates below the whaling business. Baxter gives him an effusive greeting and insists he have something to eat and drink.



"I should never have been on that ship," he tells Baxter. "I should never have seen what I saw there" (231). They exchange a few melancholy words about the fate of the other men, especially Drax. Sumner collects his wages and leaves, after Baxter arranges for him to spend the night in the nearby Pilgrim's Arms hotel. Then Baxter goes to one of the guest rooms, knocks once and enters. He shakes the man sleeping in the bed—Henry Drax.

Baxter tells Drax that Sumner is determined to find and prosecute him. Baxter instructs Drax to find Sumner at the Pilgrim's Arms and kill him because of what he knows and suspects about the murders as well as their collusion in sinking the Volunteer. Drax demands more money, in addition to what he was paid from the insurance proceeds. Baxter agrees and tells his dimwit sidekick, Stevens, he wants him to kill Drax after Drax kills Sumner, and then to place Drax's revolver in Sumner's hands so it looks like a duel.

Baxter also tells Stevens to lure Sumner out of his room by telling the surgeon that Baxter has information about the Volunteer that he wants to give him at his house. A drunken Drax lurks in the dark shadows of the dockside timber yard. He checks his revolver and the bullets fall to the ground. He reloads, and then hears someone approaching. In Chapter 24 Drax raises his pistol and fires. When the victim falls, Drax realizes he has shot the wrong man and Sumner must be somewhere in the yard.

Drax stumbles toward a small cabin where Sumner is hiding. Sumner grabs a rusty saw blade and when Drax enters, he drives the blade deep into his neck causing a huge gush of arterial blood. Drax falls and Sumner draws the saw blade across his neck again, nearly decapitating him. Sumner grabs Drax's gun from the floor and runs off into the darkness.

Sumner returns to the bar and asks for a schedule for the next train leaving town, which is not until morning. Sumner gets the address of Baxter's house from the bartender, who refers to him as a "rich bastard" who made his money in the whaling business (242). Sumner goes to Baxter's house and threatens him with the pistol. Baxter tells him to put away the gun and offers him 50 guineas in gold as payment for killing Drax. Sumner says he will leave and go to London if Baxter gives him everything in his safe, which he does.

Sumner binds and gags Baxter, loads his bags of gold onto one of his horses from the stable, and rides off. He spends the night at a roadside inn under an assumed name. The next day he stops at Guisborough where he sells the horse and saddle for half their actual value. In the Baltic Tavern, Sumner meets the captain of a Swedish brig leaving for Hamburg, Germany in the morning and with two gold coins, pays for his passage. In Chapter 25, Sumner visits the zoo in Berlin and encounters a caged bear whose stare follows him around and makes him wonder if this could be his former "pet."



Analysis

The focal point of these final chapters is what remains of the human personality in the face of overwhelming shock and loss. With the trappings of the social order and the predictable parameters of personality stripped away, the reader is shown the base instincts for survival and how they shape behavior.

It becomes apparent that those among the crew of the Volunteer who are corrupted by their misfortune find no survival advantage in returning to atavistic behavior. By the time Sumner is finally able to get a rescue ride back to England, most of his fellow crew have either been murdered or died because of exposure to the elements.

In Chapter 22, Sumner encounters a priest at an Eskimo village who is surprised to learn that the physician has survived by placing himself within the carcass of the slain bear. As the priest gives Sumner bits of food and some brandy he speculates that his deliverance is some kind of divine intervention. But Sumner dismisses the homily with a wave of the hand and says he wants no part of "that rigmarole" (211). The Eskimos give him a steaming hot bowl of seal blood. To Sumner this ritual is as meaningless as the practices of Christianity.

"He doesn't begrudge these beliefs although he knows they aren't true," the author writes (217). "He hasn't joined them—he is not an Eskimo any more than he is a Christian or an Irishman or doctor. He is nothing, and that is a privilege and a joy he is loath to give up" (217). It is not so much that Sumner has lost whatever beliefs he may have had before his experience in the North Waters, but rather that he has lost the capacity to believe with a trusting and open heart.

To the casual observer, it appears that the thin veneer of civilization is much more than a sophisticated conceit: it is the very essence of survival. There is, it seems, no survival advantage in becoming a wild man because it runs counter to the evolutionary path of our species, homo sapiens. We survive through cooperation, not chaos. The final chapter adds an offbeat note related to power and control when Sumner encounters a bear in the Berlin zoo that spooks him with memories of "his" bear in the North Waters.

Before Sumner disappears he gets revenge on both Jacob Baxter and Henry Drax in the final chapters. When Sumner, the surgeon, uses an ice saw to nearly decapitate a drunken, angry Drax who has conspired with Baxter to sink the Volunteer so they could claim the insurance money for the vessel, it seems a fitting and just conclusion to a bloody tale of deception, fraud, and murder. The author succeeds in winning the reader's sympathies for Sumner although he has himself become debased by his experiences at sea. Sumner's departure for Europe and a new way of life provides a needed sigh of relief and a note of hope for his future.



Discussion Question 1

Does Baxter sense that Sumner is capable of the double-double cross that he executes to collect his pay and settle matters with Drax? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

What do you consider to be the overall message or "moral of the story" in *The North Water*, based on the novel's denouement?

Discussion Question 3

Does the English priest really understand the extent to which Sumner's soul has been beaten, battered, and tested by his experiences with the Volunteer? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

undulant, haggard, fjord, scree, baleful, fetor, elixir, dactyl, inchoate, rivulet, gewgaw, divination, ursine, gneiss, burble, rococo, transom, puce, currach, purgative, audacious, sternum, encoffined



Characters

Patrick Sumners

The protagonist Patrick Sumner is the British-educated surgeon around whom the story revolves. Sumner is a naive member of the British upper class who encounters the underbelly of society when he joins the crew of the *Volunteer*. Sumner is also a drug addict who needs laudanum on a daily basis to cope with his life.

Sumner's refined tastes for classical literature and his own desire to write poetry are in conflict with his position aboard a ship loaded with unseemly characters who range from the merely eccentric to the flagrantly criminal. Although Sumner tries to insulate himself from the other crew, his compassionate and healing instincts are still bruised by the suffering of the men.

Henry Drax

Henry Drax, the novel's antagonist, is a harpoonist on the *Volunteer* who seems to function outside the normal boundaries of human society. Like a true psychopath, Drax does whatever he pleases—including committing sodomy and murder—and maintains that the regular laws and codes of humanity are for other people. Drax exhibits a kind of cold-blooded narcissism not uncommon among sociopaths.

When the evidence points toward Drax as the murderer of a young cabin boy, his attitude is the rough equivalent of "so what?" Patrick Sumner only realizes the depth of Drax's depravity when he returns to England after the sinking of the *Volunteer* and discovers that Drax has conspired with Baxter in an elaborate insurance fraud. Sumner's murder of Drax then seems almost justified.

Joseph Hanna

Joseph Hanna is a young deck hand on the *Volunteer* who is sodomized and killed by Henry Drax. He is a vulnerable, shy young man who is unwilling to talk about the details of his sexual assault. In his vulnerability, Hanna is the perfect victim for the predator, Henry Drax.

Captain Brownlee

Brownlee is the captain of the *Volunteer* when Patrick Sumner is hired as ship's surgeon. Brownlee is a simple man who tries to treat the crew fairly but is resented because of his position and authority. Brownlee is also revealed as a co-conspirator in a plot to sink the *Volunteer*.



Jacob Baxter

Baxter is the business agent for the whaling company who colludes with Drax and other crewmen to sink the Volunteer and make it appear to be caused by ice floes in order to collect on a fraudulent insurance claim. Baxter is a superficially friendly man who is a liar and manipulator.

Cavendish

Cavendish is the crewman who replaces Captain Brownlee as head of the Volunteer after Brownlee is attacked by Drax. Cavendish is unsuspecting of the intrigue and criminality afoot on the Volunteer when he assumes command.

Punnie

Punnie is one of two wives of an Eskimo leader who sleeps with, and has sex with Sumner after his rescue from the sunken Volunteer. She seems to perform these favors mechanically, and Sumner doubts whether she really cares about him.

Otto

Otto is a pragmatic mathematical German seaman who seems to be one of the few crewmen of the Volunteer to be even remotely happy with his situation in life. He practices a kind of spirituality known as Swedenborgian. Otto provides a bit of philosophy and perspective on the events aboard the Volunteer that prove helpful and comforting to Patrick Sumner.

McKendrick

McKendrick is one of the crewmen aboard the Volunteer who is first suspected and accused of being the murderer of Joseph Hannah, until suspicions focus on Henry Drax. He is imprisoned in the ship's hold without trial until Sumner insists that he was incapable of committing the murder.

Bannon

Bannon is one of the Shetland Islanders hired by Brownlee as a crew member on the Volunteer. He is killed when Cavendish shoots him in the head with his rifle during a melee on the ship.



Symbols and Symbolism

Rifle

The rifles used by the crewmen of the Volunteer symbolize power -- specifically, the power of the Europeans to overcome the dangers of their hazardous environment in the north waters. Later, the rifle becomes symbolic of the waning power of the whalers as they desperately try to bargain with the Eskimos for seals. The crew get only a fraction of the seals they had hoped to consume to survive the winter. This could be construed as a sign of the loss of power by the Europeans in the face of wild nature and the aboriginals who know they can survive without guns.

Medical Supplies/Laudanum

The medicine chest of the ship's surgeon, Sumner, symbolizes the importance of science and rational thought in surviving a long sea journey in the north. When the medicine chest is fully supplied, it includes laudanum (morphine) which Sumner needs to sleep. Thus, the opiate in the medicine chest symbolizes the need of the crew to escape the hardships of their mission.

Henry Drax

Drax, the perverted murderer, both symbolizes and personifies evil in this story. Drax is a harpoonist whose life is centered on slaughtering other creatures—both human and animal—for his own survival. Animal-like, he shows no remorse for his violent behavior and seems to operate in a kind of moral and ethical vacuum. Drax also symbolizes the latent evil in all men that can be activated whenever they feel threatened or fearful. This is the same fear that causes wars and their attendant evils.

Whaling/Sealing

The mission of the Volunteer, to collect as much blubber as possible from northern seals, is what guides the actions and priorities of the crew members and captain. Beneath that mission, though, is the outright slaughter of indigenous species in a murderous search for fuel to light the lamps and heat the stoves of those who live in "civilization." Thus, whaling/sealing and any kind of direct exploitation of nature are symbolic of man's ability to consume resources in a predatory, non-sustaining fashion.

Sodomy

The kind of sodomy that Henry Drax foists upon the cabin boy Hannah symbolizes utter powerlessness as well as Drax's own self-contempt. It is obvious that he feels some



kind of victory over his own feelings of inadequacy by raping and killing. It is probable that Drax himself, a crusty, hard-boiled psychopath, became the way he is because of his own experience of being raped as a child. In that instance, this symbol is a powerful reminder of the kind of abuse that can be passed down through the generations.

Patrick Sumner, MD

Patrick Sumner is not only the lead character in the book, but also a symbol of career ambitions gone terribly wrong. After a dangerous assignment in India for the British government, Sumner succumbs to the easy route of hiring on as ship's surgeon on the *Volunteer*. This is a mistake that Sumner himself later admits, and one that nearly costs him his life. If nothing else, his experience teaches that accepting a job from a stranger in a bar is probably not the ideal way to advance one's career.

Bear

Sumner develops mixed feelings towards the bear he adopts and cares for on the ship. On the one hand, the bear is almost like a pet and yet he is obviously a wild animal that will never behave like a dog, for example. So the bear represents the deep ambivalence some people feel—often tinged with guilt—toward animals. In Sumner's case, there is a real love and caring for the bear mixed with his awareness that the creature must be returned to the wild and to his mother.

The Hastings

The British whaling vessel the *Hastings* is a symbol of the orderly, rational world of western Europe that represents Patrick Sumner's deliverance from the violence and savagery of the North Water.

Bear Carcass

Sumner kills the bear, then climbs inside his carcass for warmth which could be viewed as symbolic of the fact he has to fully embrace the man-eats-bear ethos of the far north in order to transcend and escape.

The Priest

Altogether, the priest symbolizes the necessity of a balance between physical and spiritual forces for a healthy life, as he demonstrates when he falls ill and endures a painful but successful procedure to rid him of infection. The English priest who Sumner encounters is a man alone in a foreign land, much as the surgeon. Sumner has only his medical skills and training as survival assets; the priest has only his faith and his Bible for survival.



Settings

The Volunteer

The Volunteer is the whaling/sealing ship initially under the command of Captain Brownlee, until he is murdered by Henry Drax and Cavendish becomes the replacement captain. It is the setting for most of the intrigue and violence that form the narrative backbone of this novel. It is Cavendish who decides to scuttle the Volunteer in an ill-fated attempt to fraudulently collect insurance; it is aboard the Volunteer that Henry Drax rapes and kills an adolescent cabin boy; and it is aboard the Volunteer that Patrick Sumner drifts into narcotics addiction.

Delhi, India

The overthrow of British colonial rule overcomes Patrick Sumner while he is posted in Delhi and causes him to leave the country and the British government. In escaping Delhi and going to the North Water, Sumner is really just exchanging one form of chaos for another.

Liverpool, England

Liverpool is where Doctor Sumner meets Drax in a bar and is recruited to join the crew of the Volunteer. Drax is a smooth-talking con man and murderer who convinces the surgeon that joining the crew would be a good career move.

The North Waters

Although not identified on maps, the North Waters are a kind of no-man's land north of territorial waters of Europe where whaling and seal hunting ships ply their trade. The confines, boundaries and customs of "civilized" society do not pertain in this wild and atavistic region. It is directly into this alternative reality that The Volunteer and other blubber-seeking vessels sail.

Eskimo village

After the sinking of the Volunteer, Patrick Sumner lives in an Eskimo village with the non-English-speaking aboriginals, eating seal meat and having sex with one of the women, until he is picked up by another whaling vessel and returned to England.



Themes and Motifs

Survival

Desperation in the Darwinian struggle for survival can drive criminal behavior and mental illness, as the author makes clear in both the characters and plot lines of *The North Water*. The overriding theme, from the evils of Henry Drax to the innocent seals hunted by the crew of the *Volunteer*, is survival.

The survival instinct is inherent in all humans, but is perhaps less obvious in those with "respectable" positions in society, as opposed to people lower on the socioeconomic ladder (most of the characters in this novel).

Every character does what he considers necessary for survival. The surgeon Patrick Sumner joins the crew because he is adrift in his own life and in need of work for survival. Drax, the harpooner, rapes a young crewman and kills him with the same calculating dispatch he shows towards the seals because in his disordered character such behavior is justified by his need to survive.

Henry Drax, for example, is a scheming psychopath and sexual predator who uses and often murders younger men for his own sexual and survival instincts—a more complex but equally sinister character who could be seen as a contemporary exploiter of children like Fagin in Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, operator of a ring of child thieves, or even Falstaff, who appears in several of Shakespeare's plays.

Symbolism related to the theme of survival includes the bear, which makes numerous escapes before it is finally shot by Sumner. In an extension of this symbolism, the bear skin that Sumner then wraps himself in serves as a means of survival against the extreme conditions and cold that he faces. Likewise, the seals and whales that are hunted by the crew serve as means for survival, as do the wreckage from the *Hastings* which are burned for warmth and the inhabitants of the Inuktitut village who save Sumner.

Predation

As a result of their survival instincts, characters in *The North Water* display increasingly predatory behavior as the novel progresses. This includes their attitudes and actions on the ship toward each other as well as toward their prey—seals. This behavior has a parallel in human conduct in so-called ghettos where the victims of racism and poverty often turn violently against each other instead of toward cooperation in seeking to expand their opportunities for survival. In *The North Water*, as in many areas of human activity, predation is profit.

In the open seas, as on the wild lands of earth, many creatures live by predation. Fish eat kill and other smaller creatures. Seals and whales eat smaller fish; humans kill and



eat seals and whales. Humans, however, have developed agriculture, mariculture, and livestock as means to raise food sources without the need for hunting. And yet, in many ways, human society still allows and rewards predatory behavior in business, the military, and to some extent in professional sports. Here, the author's message seems to be that society approves of some types of predation and disapproves of others.

With the displacement of older forms of energy from the use of fossil fuels, humankind relies much less on direct predation of living organisms. However the hunter/killer instinct lives on and is manifested in destructive business practices, environmental exploitation, and even in domestic violence. In *The North Water*, the reader can detect the link between environmental and humanistic attitudes and the many faces of violence.

Predation serves as a backdrop to the crew on the *Volunteer*, and is seen in the actions of the men hunting seals and whales and in the various murders committed by antagonist Henry Drax. While Drax's initial murder of the young crewman protects him from criminal accusation, his later murders aboard the *Volunteer* serve to protect his secret regarding the fraudulent insurance claim.

Revenge

Revenge could be seen as one of a cluster of maladaptive coping mechanisms that several characters employ, to their own and others' disadvantage in this novel. These also include sexual perversion, murder, greed, and drug addiction. The author's exploration of these themes brings into sharp relief the question of whether, and to what extent, these character defects feed on and amplify each other.

Henry Drax enacts revenge for his imprisonment aboard the *Volunteer* by killing several crew members and the captain of the ship. Likewise, as moral depravity spreads among the crew, the concepts of "good and evil" and "revenge" begin to lose their meaning. The author writes, "There is no sin left now, there is only the blood and the water and the ice; there is only life and death and the grey-green spaces in between. He will not die he tells himself, not now, not ever. When he is thirsty, he will drink his own blood; when he is hungry, he will eat his own flesh. He will grow enormous from the feasting, he will expand to fill the empty sky" (46).

Patrick Sumner, once he learns of the crooked dealings of Baxter and Drax, seeks revenge for himself and for those men who have lost their lives while trapped in the criminal web of greed and violence spun by Drax and Baxter involving the *Volunteer*.

Sumner doesn't get his revenge until after he survives a horrible winter in the north, finds a ship to carry him back to England and confronts Baxter. This revenge involves the grisly murder of Drax with a saw blade as well as the extortion of a large quantity of illicit gold from Baxter's safe.



The Impacts of Technology

The misadventures of the *Volunteer* and her crew highlight one reason why whaling is a dying business. Petroleum has become the new energy source that will light the cities, drive the vehicles and provide the basis for an electric future in the western world. Opportunists and criminals like Baxter and Drax seek to bleed the old system based on consumption of blubber oil, through insurance fraud, and because they have neither the skills nor inclination to find new jobs in the emerging oil economy.

Of course, there is an obvious parallel between the phasing out of blubber oil and petroleum oil in contemporary times. Although environmental groups and governments seek to shift to a renewable and sustainable energy economy, that goal seems more difficult to reach as oil and coal companies, in particular, continue drilling and mining. Taking the next step in the development of energy—away from fossil fuels—means economic displacements, an end to some jobs and the creation of new ones. The author's handling of this theme suggests that any broad economic changes are always slow, and always painful.

The impacts of technology are also explored in *The North Water* by juxtaposition. When the crew of the *Volunteer* are forced to burn wreckage from the *Hastings* and are trapped in unbearable conditions, the reader sees the extent that technology can be taken away—and leave those in its absence facing life-or-death situations.

The Brutality of Capitalism

The brutality of men toward the natural environment is returned in karma-like fashion by the forces of nature that trigger extreme and often violent behavior in *The North Water*.

The whaling/sealing business is a key cog in the machinery of an emerging capitalist economy in both Europe and the United States in the 19th Century. The trade in blubber is a transparent theft of a natural resource from living creatures, with no attempt to regulate or restore the threatened species of mammals. Instead, the capitalist system switches to extracting petroleum from the ground. The message is that the brutality produced by these practices corrupts men to criminal behavior and depletes finite natural resources. How this impacts both men and nature is a central theme.

What, for example, is the connection if any between Henry Drax's killing and butchering of whales and seals and his predatory pursuit of young men? In the case of Drax, hunting and killing—whether humans or animals—is an act of dominance that gives him strong feelings of power and mastery.

Aside from the actions of Henry Drax, the theme of capitalism and its brutality is clearly symbolized through the slaughter of the whales and seals by the crew of the *Volunteer*; through the fraudulent insurance claim plotted by Drax and Baxter; and even through Sumner's final confrontation with Baxter which ends with his claim of money and escape into Germany.



Styles

Point of View

The point of view of the novel is primarily that of the omniscient narrator. Although he or she is not named, the reader has the sense that the narrator is, if not one of the characters, someone so familiar with the whaling/sealing business that their words convey an authenticity both with the setting and with the rough hewn (even psychopathic) characters. This easy familiarity brings the story to life in the present moment and imparts a sense of immediacy about all aspects of the story.

The point of view in the historical present is that of Sumner. In his drug use, pacifism, and unselfishness, Sumner is a type easily recognizable as post-hippie, while the personalities of most of the other men seem archaic and anachronistic. Therefore, the contemporary reader probably can relate to Sumner's point of view better than that of the other characters.

Language and Meaning

The novel employs standard English as would be spoken by the middle to lower classes in the 1800s for dialogue, but uses contemporary English for narrative. There are a few peculiarities in the spoken, or dialogue portions as, for example, several crewmen aboard the Volunteer whaling vessel say "int" for "isn't" and "want" for "wasn't." There is a coarseness and vulgarity in their speech that may persist into the twenty-first century. Sumner, the ship's doctor, speaks a variety of British English that reflects his socioeconomic and educational background with very little profanity. These differences in speech patterns reflect the division of British society into the privileged upper class, and the lower classes. However, in the tension of this novel, where characters fight for their survival, the differences in speech patterns do not seem to matter in terms of effective communication.

There is also a marked and persistent use of profanity throughout the book.

Structure

The structure of the book is straightforward narrative that employs the situation/problem-challenge-crisis-resolution format typical of most mainstream fiction. The only variance is a flashback when Sumner is very ill after the sinking of the Volunteer; his delirium takes him back to the fighting between the British and Indians that he experienced during his posting in India. Through the use of this technique, the reader understands that Sumner may not have the physical and mental stamina to cope with situations of extreme danger to which he has been exposed. This could serve as an explanation for his somewhat detached attitude toward the murderer Drax and the desperate struggle for survival that befalls the men of the Volunteer. In today's parlance,

Sumner probably would be diagnosed as someone with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).



Quotes

The boy frowns for a moment, then offers him a beguiling and implausible grin. Drax grabs the boy by the hair and punches him, then punches him again and again—two, three, four times fast without hesitation or compunction—until Drax's knuckles are warm and dark with blood and the boy is slumped, limp and unconscious. Drax turns him over and pulls down his britches. There is no pleasure in the act and no relief, a fact which only increases its ferocity.

-- Henry Drax (chapter 1 paragraph 5-6)

Importance: This quotation illustrates how criminally depraved Drax is, long before he sets sail on *The Volunteer* where he rapes and kills another young crew member.

Out on the ice, Drax works alone, moving back and forth, patient and relentless from one group [of seals] to the next, shooting and clubbing them as he goes. The young ones shriek at him and try to addle away but are too slow and stupid to escape. The older ones he puts a bullet in. When he has killed a seal, he turns it over, cuts the hind flippers, then slashes it open from the neck to the genitals. He hooks the severed skin onto a line for dragging and leaves the blood-sodden and meat-streaked krang like a gruesome afterbirth on the snow to be pecked at by gulls or eaten by bear cubs.

-- Henry Drax (chapter 5 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote defines the bloody and murderous character of Drax, who is, in fact, a murderer. His treatment of the seals reflects his attitude toward all living creatures.

He tosses the splintered wood aside then peers indifferently and without expectation back into the half-empty barrel. He sees curled up inside it, part submerged in the remnants of the ballast water, like some monstrous fungal knottage, bred and nurtured in the fetid petri of the hold, the torn, dead and naked body of Joseph Hanna, cabin boy.

-- Otto (chapter 10 paragraph 5)

Importance: This quote makes explicit the unclean and unsafe conditions under which the men of the *Volunteer* labor and sometimes harm each other.

In the wardroom, Drax listens as the others talk, They are talking about the boy again, even though the boy is dead and gone. He has a bite mark on his forearm a half-inch deep. He can feel it throb and itch. It would have been quicker and easier, he knows, to cut the boy's throat, but a knife was not to hand. He doesn't plan these things. He only acts, and each action remains separate and complete in itself: the fucking, the killing, the shitting, the eating.

-- Narrator (chapter 12 paragraph 1)

Importance: The reader gets a glimpse inside the mind of a criminally insane person—Henry Drax—as he ruminates on his killing of the young deck hand. Apparent are the



disorganized thought patterns, the malleable sense of morality, and the overriding selfishness that enable him to commit murder.

The wound, high on [Drax's] forearm near the elbow, half hidden by hair and ink, is narrow but deep and the site around it is severely swollen. The skin, when Sumner touches it, is tense and hot. Sumner goes to his cabin and returns with a lancet, which he heats for a minute over the candle flame. A green-pink mixture of blood and pus spills out and soaks into the padding, but there remains a singular lump. Sumner presses the small lump, and it emerges from the wound's opening. It is a child's tooth, pale and grain-like, broken off at the root.

-- narrator (chapter 14 paragraph 10)

Importance: This quote is important because it reveals how the hard evidence against Drax as the killer of Hanna emerges during a medical exam.

Amongst the crew [there is] a general certainty that the voyage itself is cursed. They remember the gruesome stories of the Percival of men dying, going mad, drinking their own blood for sustenance, and ask themselves why they were ever foolish or ill-advised to sign on for a ship commanded by a man so notable for his fearsome ill luck. They fear that worse is yet to come and they would rather reach home with empty pockets but still breathing than end up sunk forever below the Baffin ice.

-- Narrator (chapter 15 paragraph 3)

Importance: This passage describes the state of mind of the Volunteer crew as they face an arctic winter, and is essential for understanding the behavior that flows from this sense of hopelessness.

Let me tell you something. Unlike some, perhaps, I don't come whaling for fresh air or for the fine sea views. I don't even come for the pleasing company of men like you and Otto here. I come whaling to get my money and I will get my money any way I can. If your opinions came in gold with the queen's head stamped upon them, I might pay them a little mind but since they don't you won't be too offended, I hope, if I take no fucking notice of them at all.

-- Cavendish (chapter 15 paragraph 7)

Importance: This quote reveals the mercenary core of why men would put their life at risk sailing arctic waters in winter to collect seal blubber. It also shows the kind of hard determination of Cavendish, who would eventually become captain of the Volunteer.

Within two hours, the ship has pitched forwards so far that its bowsprit is lying flat against the ice and the foremast has snapped clean in two. Cavendish sends Black aboard with a team of men to salvage the booms, spars and rigging and cut down the other masts before they break off also. De-masted and with only its stern poking above the piled-up ice around it, the ship appears rumpish and ludicrous, an emasculated mockery of what it once was and Sumner wonders how he could ever have believed such a fragile conglomeration of wood, nails and rope could protect or keep him safe.

-- Narrator (chapter 17 paragraph 1)



Importance: This passage is important because it represents the moment when Patrick Sumner begins to awaken from his false sense of security regarding his adventures on the Volunteer. When he sees the fragile, broken condition of the ship Sumner identifies it with his emotional state.

Sumner feels a pain growing behind his eyeballs, a sour sickness curdling in his stomach. Talking to Drax is like shouting into the blackness and expecting the blackness to answer back in kind. 'There's no reasoning with a man like you,' Sumner says. Drax shrugs again and looks away. Outside the tent the men are playing a comical game of cricket on the snow using staves for bats and a ball made of sealskin and sawdust. 'Why do you keep that gold ring?' Drax asks. 'Why not sell it on?' 'I keep it for remembrance,' Sumner says.

-- Henry Drax, Sumner (chapter 17 paragraph 12)

Importance: This quote delineates the difference between Sumner, an educated man with rather refined tastes and Drax, a product of the uneducated lower classes with a violent and criminal past.

Sumner shakes his head again. The three remaining men have retreated into the tent for warmth. It is too cold to linger outside for long, but he cannot bear the thought of returning to their dreary, hopeless company, so instead he sets off walking east past Cavendish's new-dug grave and onto the frozen bay. The wind is blowing against him as he begins to walk back. He stops, groans, then leans over and vomits out gobbets of half-digested seal meat onto the frozen snow beneath.

-- Narrator (chapter 20 paragraph 9)

Importance: This quote shows how Sumner reacts to the adversity that has been thrust upon him and the crew of his ship. He is both spiritually and physically sick.

Freed from the chains, Drax feels suddenly larger and younger than before. It is as if, since the instant he murdered Brownlee, he has been asleep and now he is awake at last. Holding the file with both hands, Drax drives the spiked end into the man's neck just below the ear; there is a spurt of hot blood and a noise somewhere between a gurgle and a gasp. He pulls out the spike and then quickly drives it in again, a little lower this time. When the younger man stirs, aroused by the noise, Drax turns, punches him twice to keep him quiet, then starts to throttle him. Cavendish pauses, shakes his head, then moves forwards and leans down to take a look in the bag. Drax steps off to the side, grabs him by the forelock, yanks his chin upwards and cuts through his windpipe with one single slice of the blubber knife.

-- Narrator (chapter 19 paragraph 19)

Importance: If proof were needed that Drax is a deranged and murderous man this passage provides it. The reader can feel every thrust of the knife, every crack of each bone as Drax reduces his victim to chopped meat.



In the cabin, Sumner grips a rusted saw blade in both hands. He holds it poised, shoulder high, and waits. When Drax steps across the threshold he swings it forwards in a hard flat arc. The jagged edge strikes just above the collarbone. There is a hot squirt of arterial blood, a long repellent gurgle. Drax stands poised and upright for moment as if waiting for something else—something better—to happen to him, then he topples back against the lintel. His head is askew. The ragged wound gapes like a second mouth. Sumner, without thought or qualm, as if moving in a dream, tugs the saw blade back, then drives it in deeper. Drax, half decapitated, pitches face-first onto the black dirt outside; his gun clatters onto the cabin floor. Sumner stares a moment, horrified by the shape of his accomplishment, then grabs the gun and rushes back across the cindered yard."

-- Henry Drax (chapter 24 paragraph 5)

Importance: This quote would be deeply satisfying to many readers, bloody and desperate though it is. That is because Drax finally gets the kind of butchery that he so often delivered to his own innocent victims.