

Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JULES VERNE

Jules Verne was born in the port city of Nantes, France. He began writing fiction and poetry while a schoolboy, but was sent to study law in Paris by his father, who was himself an attorney. From an early age, Verne was fascinated by maritime exploration and adventure. As a young man, he fell in love with two women who ended up marrying other men: first his cousin Caroline, then a young woman named Rose Herminie Arnaud Grossetière. Verne lived in Paris during the French Revolution of 1848. He frequented literary salons, and became friends with the writer Alexander Dumas. Although Verne's father tried to force him to give up writing in favor of becoming a lawyer, Verne persisted, and ended up inventing a new genre: the *Roman de la Science* (novel of science), which is now regarded as an early form of science fiction. *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, published in 1870, is an example of this new genre of novel. Verne was a prolific writer, publishing two books a year for a number of years. He was wealthy and successful in his own time, and is remembered as one of the founders of science fiction. Having contracted diabetes, Verne died at home at the age of 77.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea incorporates a number of real historical events into its narrative, including its references to the famous maritime explorers Matthew Fontane Maury; Jean-François de Galaup, comte de Lapérouse; and Dumont d'Urville, as well as imperialists ranging from James Cook to Pedro Fernández de Queirós. Broadly, the novel responds to the legacy of global imperialism in several ways. It captures the sense of excitement and triumph that accompanied Western explorers' "conquering" of different regions of the globe, but also alludes to the injustice, exploitation, and violence that were central to colonial exploration. The novel also responds to the advances in scientific technology that accelerated in the 19th century, including the increasingly widespread use of electricity and the shifting understanding of the natural world inaugurated by the theories of scientists such as Charles Darwin.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Other early examples of science fiction include Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Voltaire's *Micromégas*, and, later, the novels of H.G. Wells. Verne was heavily influenced by Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe*, which, like *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the*

Sea, explores themes of maritime adventure, imperialism, and the solitude of exile from Western society. The novel also closely echoes Victor Hugo's *Toilers of the Sea*, a work explicitly mentioned in the narrative. *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* in turn inspired many novels from the Golden Age of Science Fiction (which stretched roughly from the 1930s to the 1950s) and beyond. Other science fiction and fantasy novels that are set underwater (or otherwise focus on the ocean) include Michael Crichton's *Sphere*, Frank Herbert's *The Dragon in the Sea*, Carol Severance's *Reefsong*, and China Miéville's *The Scar*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea: A World Tour Underwater*
- **When Written:** 1869-1870
- **Where Written:** Paris, France
- **When Published:** 1870 (English translation 1872)
- **Literary Period:** Romanticism; Realism
- **Genre:** Science Fiction
- **Setting:** Across the world's oceans
- **Climax:** Captain Nemo attacks an approaching warship in a fit of vengeful rage, killing everyone on board.
- **Antagonist:** Captain Nemo, though he is also portrayed sympathetically
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Lost in Translation. The first English translation of the novel, by Rev. Lewis Page Mercier, was filled with errors—both accidental and intentional—yet this remained the standard English version for 100 years.

Fish Are Friends. The eponymous fish in Pixar's 2003 animated film *Finding Nemo* is named after Verne's Captain Nemo.



PLOT SUMMARY

In 1866, the world is captivated by rumors of a "phosphorescent" sea monster that is spotted by several ships around the globe. The monster is depicted in newspaper articles, songs, and plays. After the monster bores a large hole inside the bottom of a Quebecois passenger ship, all unsolved shipwrecks are blamed on the mysterious creature.

The narrator, a professor of natural history from Paris named

Pierre Arronax, has just returned to New York after six months of fieldwork in Nebraska. He is the author of a book entitled *Mysteries of the Unsounded Depths Undersea*, and is thus consulted as an expert on what the mysterious monster could possibly be. He argues that it is likely some kind of gigantic narwhal. He is invited to join an expedition on a U.S. naval ship, the *Abraham Lincoln*, in search of the monster, and enthusiastically accepts. He is accompanied by his faithful servant, a Flemish man named Conseil. The ship is commandeered by Captain Farragut, who considers it his personal mission to find and destroy the monster. Farragut offers \$2,000 to whomever is the first person aboard to catch sight of it. One of the other men on board is an expert harpooner named Ned Land, a 40-year-old from Quebec. Although they have very different characters, Ned and Arronax bond over their connected countries of origin.

After a long period searching in vain, Farragut announces that the mission will be called off if the monster isn't found in the next three days. However, on the final day, Ned sees the monster glowing brightly in the water. The *Abraham Lincoln* initially retreats, but after the monster appears to fall asleep, it advances and attacks. Ned harpoons it and at this point jets of water erupt from it, throwing Arronax into the ocean. Arronax and Conseil almost drown. Arronax eventually loses consciousness, and when he wakes up he is on board the monster—which is actually not a monster at all, but a submarine. Ned and Conseil are there too, and the three of them are taken down into a prison cell by men wearing masks. A tall man and his shorter companion enter the cell, and speak to each other in a language Arronax doesn't recognize. The captives try to introduce themselves in English, French, German, and Latin, but none of these attempts elicit a reaction.

After Arronax falls asleep and wakes up again, the tall man from earlier—the submarine's commander, Captain Nemo—introduces himself in perfect, unaccented French. He explains that he has taken the men captive as prisoners of war. Nemo himself has fled society and its "stupid laws." He is an admirer of Arronax's work on the deep sea, and looks forward to showing Arronax the "fairylane of marvels" that can be found in the ocean. Nemo shows Arronax an impressive museum and library filled with an enormous number of items. He also explains that the submarine, the *Nautilus*, is powered by **electricity**. Nemo then tells Arronax that he and the others will remain on the vessel for the rest of their lives as prisoners.

Nemo and Arronax go to smoke seaweed cigars in the vessel's saloon, and Nemo explains that he is an engineer who built the submarine himself in secret. He also reveals that he is extraordinarily wealthy. The *Nautilus* periodically goes up to the water's surface to stock up on oxygen before descending back down to the ocean floor. One day, Nemo shows Arronax, Ned, and Conseil oxygen tanks which can be worn underwater, and they go on a hunting expedition to the underwater "forests of

the island of Crespo." During the expedition, two man-eating sharks pass by, but fortunately do not notice the men swimming.

Christmas passes, although there are no celebrations on the ship. On the first day of 1868 Conseil wishes Arronax a happy New Year, and Arronax wonders if their captivity will soon end. Shortly after, the *Nautilus* runs aground on an island in the Torres Strait, and Nemo gives the three captives permission to explore the island. They are ecstatic to be on dry land and excited by the prospect of hunting and eating red meat. They discover an amazing array of wildlife and greedily hunt birds and mammals, but are then driven off the island by native Papuans who shoot stones at them. Shortly after, the tide rises enough to push the *Nautilus* off its beached position.

Over time, the captives become used to their rather repetitive life on board the *Nautilus*. At one point, Nemo is disturbed by something he sees through his telescope and sends the three men downstairs, putting them to sleep by drugging their food. The next day, Nemo asks Arronax to provide medical treatment to one of his sailors, who has a terrible head wound. Arronax cannot save him, and he dies, which devastates Nemo.

After passing through the Bay of Bengal, the ship arrives on the island of Ceylon, which is known for its pearl fisheries. The men go on a pearl-fishing expedition, during which Nemo risks his life in order to save another pearl diver—whom he doesn't know—from being eaten by a shark. Not long after, the *Nautilus* arrives in the Mediterranean, and this prompts the three captives to discuss the possibility of escape. Arronax worries that if they make an escape attempt and it fails, they may ruin their chances of freedom forever. However, in the end the submarine races through the Mediterranean, such that the captives don't get a chance to escape. Before long, they are back in the Atlantic Ocean.

Determined to escape anyway, Ned makes a plan, and Arronax feels conflicted. He wants his companions to be free but is devastated by the prospect of leaving the *Nautilus* and the unique opportunities for research it presents. While having a conversation with Nemo, Arronax realizes that Nemo has gained his wealth by raiding the booties of shipwrecks and selling them. Arronax asks Nemo if it wouldn't be better to share these treasures with the world, but Nemo indignantly replies by insisting that he acts in solidarity with "the oppressed people of this world." The submarine has moved too far away from Europe, however, and Ned is forced to abandon his escape plans, which secretly relieves Arronax. Arronax considers bringing up the prospect of his freedom with Nemo, but is worried the conversation won't go well. Lately Nemo has become increasingly withdrawn, and seems angry. The ship travels down to the South Pole, moving through waters riddled with icebergs. Nemo proposes the idea of travelling under the Great Ice Barrier, a risky move. However, after talking to Arronax, Nemo decides to go through with it.

Using scientific instruments to test the angle of the light, Nemo and the crew are able to determine that they have made it to the South Pole. Nemo immediately declares that he has “taken possession” of the territory. As they move away from the area, the *Nautilus* gets hit by a falling iceberg that ends up trapping it inside a cage of solid ice. With detached calmness, Nemo reveals that they only have two days’ air left until they suffocate. The men get to work attempting to hack their way through the ice. It is the most difficult labor of Arronax’s life, and it seems certain that it won’t work. However, just as the men on board the *Nautilus* begin to feel the effects of the oxygen running out, Nemo has the idea of blasting the ice around the submarine with boiling water. Miraculously, this works, although Arronax passes out before they make it through. Someone carries him up to the submarine’s platform, where he takes in huge gulps of fresh air.

After this harrowing incident, the ship journeys up the Atlantic past the Latin American continent, and ends up in the Bahamas, where it is attacked by a giant squid. One sailor is killed in the squid’s grip, which worsens Nemo’s depression. Arronax is also profoundly disturbed by the sailor’s death. Ned is so desperate for freedom that he is on the verge of a breakdown. Nemo reveals that he has written a manuscript about his “knowledge of the sea,” which also contains his life story. Arronax hopes this means that Nemo plans to end his exile at some point in order to share the book with the world. He brings up the prospect of his freedom, but Nemo reacts with fury. At this moment, the submarine is caught in a terrible storm.

After being tossed away from the North American coast, the submarine floats along until they arrive at a destination that Nemo announces with a solemn acknowledgment. He describes a shipwreck at this location, and in reverent tones says the ship’s name was the *Avenger*. Arronax realizes that Nemo is motivated by a fierce anger and desire for revenge. In the distance, Arronax, Conseil, and Ned spot a warship, although they can’t tell which country it comes from. They hope to escape on it, but realize that the ship sees the *Nautilus* as an enemy.

Nemo declares that he is “the oppressed” and the mysterious ship is the “oppressor.” He ends up attacking the ship from beneath, destroying it and killing all those on board. He then runs into his bedroom and stands in front of a portrait of a woman and two children, sobbing hysterically. Arronax is horrified, and feels like he is losing his grip on reality. Around two weeks later, Ned once again announces that it is time for them to make their escape. They sneak out at night, but are almost intercepted by Nemo. However, at that moment the submarine becomes caught in an enormous whirlpool near Norway, which is infamous for never leaving any survivors.

Arronax loses consciousness and wakes up in a fisherman’s hut on a Norwegian island, accompanied by Ned and Conseil. He never finds out what happens to Nemo or the *Nautilus*, though

he hopes that the anger in Nemo’s soul has subsided. Despite everything, he still believes that he and Nemo share a special connection based on their profound love for, and understanding of, the sea.



CHARACTERS

Professor Pierre Arronax – Pierre Arronax is the protagonist and narrator of the novel. He is a 40-year-old Frenchman who is a professional naturalist (an expert in the field of natural history) and an assistant professor at the Museum of Natural History in Paris. He is the author of a book entitled *Mysteries of the Unsounded Depths Undersea*. At the time the novel begins, he has just spent six months doing fieldwork in Nebraska and is looking forward to returning home to France. However, his desire to go back home is interrupted by the sighting of the mysterious “monster” (which turns out to be Captain Nemo’s submarine, the *Nautilus*) and his invitation to join Commander Farragut aboard the *Abraham Lincoln* in order to track down the monster. This results in the *Abraham Lincoln* attacking the *Nautilus* and sinking in the process, presumably killing Farragut and enabling Captain Nemo to take Arronax and his crewmates, Conseil and Ned Land, captive on the submarine. The subsequent delay in Arronax’s journey home, at times seemingly endless, invokes that of Odysseus in Homer’s the *Odyssey*. Arronax is an intelligent and dignified man whose life is totally dedicated to the pursuit of science. Indeed, scientific research is less his job than it is his whole reason for being. Arronax has a boundless curiosity about the world, and is the most adaptable character in the novel. This allows him to treat his capture by Captain Nemo and life aboard the *Nautilus* with open-minded enthusiasm, rather than simply horror. However, this becomes problematic when Arronax’s co-captors—particularly Ned—become fixated on escaping. Arronax remains unsure about trying to escape, which is both a result of his relatively timid nature and his strange attachment to Nemo. Although by the end of the novel Arronax is largely horrified by Nemo, he still retains a degree of affection and sympathy for him, and expresses the idea that the two have an irrevocable bond.

Captain Nemo – Captain Nemo is the commander of the *Nautilus*, a submarine that he built in secret and on which he lives. Nemo is a highly mysterious person. His real name and national origin are never revealed, and neither are his exact reasons for choosing to live in a state of self-imposed exile underwater. There are hints that Nemo might be a member of an oppressed and/or colonized group of people, and several interpretations of the book cast him as being from India. Nemo certainly feels a great deal of sympathy for oppressed people, although he contradictorily behaves in a rather tyrannical manner himself. He is unusually intelligent, highly educated, and extremely wealthy, having studied engineering in Paris,

London, and New York. He seems to have been victimized by a mysterious nation represented by the ship that appears at the end of the novel, upon which Nemo takes violent revenge. There are hints that whatever nation or imperial power the ship represents may have killed Nemo's family, including a wife and children, although this is not directly confirmed. The novel leaves open the question of whether Nemo is a hero or villain. Much of his behavior—including keeping Arronax, Ned, and Conseil captive, exercising tyrannical rule over his ship, and seeking violent revenge against the mysterious power that he claims wronged him—could certainly be seen as villainous. At the same time, Nemo also has a calm, gentle, and thoughtful side. During the course of the novel, he becomes increasingly despondent, possibly suffering some kind of mental breakdown. Nemo's final fate remains unknown—it is possible that he dies in the whirlpool in which the *Nautilus* is caught in Norway, but also plausible that he manages to survive.

Ned Land – Ned Land is a highly talented harpooner from Quebec who joins Professor Arronax, Arronax's servant Conseil, and Commander Farragut aboard the *Abraham Lincoln* in pursuit of a sea "monster." Like Arronax, Ned is about 40, and Arronax feels a connection with him due to their linked countries of origin (Canada and France). In most other ways, the two men are incredibly different. Ned is bold and brave, with a warrior-like quality to him. However, he is also substantially less intelligent than all the other main characters in the novel, and does not share Arronax and Nemo's enthusiasm for science. Of all three captives, Ned is most suspicious of Nemo and most eager to escape the *Nautilus*. He forms a close bond with Conseil, whom he affectionately nicknames "little cabbage."

Conseil – Conseil is a 30-year-old Flemish man who works as Arronax's servant and joins him on the *Abraham Lincoln* expedition. He is devoted to Arronax almost to the point of parody, several times attempting to sacrifice his own life in order to save that of his "master." Aside from being selfless and compassionate, Conseil is highly intelligent, and helps Arronax with his scientific research. He forms a somewhat unlikely friendship with Ned Land, and often ends up calming Ned down when he falls into states of frenzy or despair about their status as captives aboard the *Nautilus*.

Commander Farragut – Commander Farragut is the commander of the *Abraham Lincoln*, a U.S. naval ship sent in pursuit of the mysterious "monster." The naturalist Professor Arronax, his servant Conseil, and the harpooner Ned Land join Farragut on this mission. Farragut has a passionate, irrationally intense belief in the existence of the monster they're after, and has internalized a mythic sense that he and the monster are destined to go into battle, with only one emerging alive. Although Farragut's final fate is not explicitly listed, he presumably dies in the sinking of the *Abraham Lincoln* that ensues after it attacks and is sunk by Captain Nemo's *Nautilus*

submarine.



THEMES

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SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERY AND TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION

Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea represents a world in the midst of heady scientific discoveries and innovations. The central piece of technology through which this change is explored is Captain Nemo's submarine, the *Nautilus*, which allows him to spend his life permanently roaming the oceans. The novel illustrates the new and exciting opportunities made possible by scientific discovery and innovation. Told from the point of view of a naturalist, Professor Pierre Arronax, the novel also indicates that scientific research is an important and worthwhile end in itself. At the same time, the novel is cautious about the potential of science and technology to transform the world in a positive way. It suggests that scientific and technological innovations, while exhilarating, can be used for both good and bad ends. In this sense, the novel has an ambivalent and arguably rather modern attitude toward science and technology.

The novel presents scientific research in a largely positive light, conveying this idea through the particular perspective of Prof. Arronax, who is an intelligent, dedicated, and enthusiastic naturalist. A global expert on the deep sea, Arronax's is initially horrified when he and his shipmates, Ned and Conseil, are captured and brought onto the *Nautilus* by Captain Nemo. However, this turns into excitement when Arronax realizes that being confined to the *Nautilus* presents an unprecedented opportunity to pursue scientific research. Indeed, Arronax is able to endure (and even enjoy) the monotony of life aboard the *Nautilus* because he is so excited about the research opportunities that this situation enables. While Ned the harpooner and even Arronax's intelligent and devoted servant, Conseil, are fixated on escaping the submarine, Arronax remains ambivalent about the possibility of fleeing. His research means so much to him that, after being confined to the submarine for months, he admits that if Nemo gave him the option of leaving he would probably choose to stay. Arronax's devotion to his scientific research suggests that scientific discovery is valuable in part because it allows people to pursue a project greater than themselves. Caught up in the excitement of his research, Arronax doesn't care that he has been totally cut off from human civilization, repeatedly put in frightening

situations, and imprisoned within an underwater vessel with little hope of escape. His research allows him to set aside his own personal problems and needs and dedicate himself to learning about the wonders of the natural world (and in particular, the deep sea).

Yet while Verne may present scientific discovery as a more-or-less unmitigated good, the same is not true of the technological innovation to which scientific research leads. The technologies at Nemo's disposal allow him to exercise despotic, almost godlike power over the people and landscape around him, most notably the "prisoners of war" whom he captures from the *Abraham Lincoln*: Arronax, Ned, and Conseil. The idea that technological innovation can confer an unjust advantage is also explored in the novel's depiction of conflicts between humans and marine creatures, such as Ned's harpooning of a shark and a dugong. Just as Nemo's technological tools allow him to keep the three men captive aboard his boat, so is Ned able to kill a huge variety of fearsome animals that he would certainly be overpowered by without technological assistance.

At the same time, the novel's depiction of new technology is far from entirely negative; there is also a palpable sense of excitement regarding what technology can do. This is most emphatically explored through the symbol of **electricity**, which represents the seemingly endless power of scientific invention and technology. While to a contemporary reader the fact that the *Nautilus* is powered by electricity might not seem particularly exciting or innovative, in the historical context in which the novel was written (the mid-19th century), electrical power was still a somewhat mysterious, cutting-edge, and transformative technology. This is reflected in the many rapturous passages in which Arronax describes all the things that electricity makes possible aboard the submarine: allowing the vessel to move at great speed, powering a system of internal communication within it, and illuminating it such that it appears "phosphorescent" when people first see it.

Overall, then, the novel suggests that scientific discovery is a noble pursuit, but that invention and technology should not automatically be counted as forces of good in the world. Reflecting on the fact that a vessel as technologically advanced as the *Nautilus* will probably not be invented for another hundred years, Arronax notes that it is a shame that the secret of its existence will die with Nemo. At the same time, over the course of the novel, Arronax becomes increasingly horrified by the isolated, confined mode of life that the *Nautilus* makes possible. In the end, scientific research and technology cannot repair the emotional damage that drives Nemo to abandon human society and live underwater in the first place. They are merely tools, and can produce results that are both exciting and horrifying.



FREEDOM VS. CONSTRAINT

One of the more abstract philosophical questions explored in the novel regards the meaning of freedom. By depicting a protagonist and two other central characters who are captured as "prisoners of war" and confined to an underwater submarine totally cut off from society, the novel interrogates the importance of freedom while postulating that in almost all situations, freedom necessarily has limits. One of the central ways in which the tension between freedom and constraint emerges is through the contrasting depictions of the vast openness of the sea and the claustrophobic containment of the *Nautilus*. Traveling on the vessel allows a person to journey across massive distances and explore far-away areas of the globe, yet being on a submarine is also a condition defined by intense confinement. In this sense, the paradoxical experience of being both free and confined on the *Nautilus* indicates that the idea of total, unimpeded freedom is perhaps an illusion.

The novel's presentation of the inextricable interrelation of freedom and constraint is best summarized by the offer Nemo makes to his prisoners shortly after their capture. Nemo has already bestowed a kind of freedom on Arronax, Conseil, and Ned by rescuing them from death after the clash between their ship, the *Abraham Lincoln*, and the *Nautilus*. Yet this rescue also involves dramatic confinement: the men find themselves on board a submarine, inside what Arronax calls a "prison cell." As the narrative progresses it emerges that they are not really inside a cell, but instead are being offered comfortable sleeping quarters inside a submarine. They have been gifted the freedom of continued life, yet find that this freedom has strictly-imposed limits, as they must now live on board the *Nautilus*.

The depiction of a heavily-restricted freedom continues when Nemo proposes a particular bargain. He offers Arronax, Conseil, and Ned "liberty" in exchange for agreeing to one condition: if he asks them to confine themselves to their cabins, they will do so. Already, this can be read as an immoral imposition of constraint over other people. Yet prompted by Arronax's questioning, the constraint Nemo is imposing is revealed to be a lot more severe than he initially indicates. He is also planning to never let the three men leave the *Nautilus*, meaning that they will spend the rest of their lives on a submarine and will never see their family, friends, or the rest of human society again. The fact that Nemo calls this "liberty" seems somewhat laughable, as Arronax and Ned point out. Furthermore, the situation they are in means that they have no choice but to accept Nemo's offer, as the only other option is death. This is another way in which freedom is inherently limited by constraint. A person might theoretically have the freedom to choose between two options, but if one of these options is death, then can it really be said to be a choice at all?

In a sense, Nemo's decision to present an offer to the three

men and solicit their permission indicates that he is committed to maintaining the *illusion* of freedom, but that this is indeed little more than a false façade. Putting aside his reasons for doing so, it is obvious that Nemo is not really offering the men freedom, but rather placing severe constraints on them. At the same time, the novel also indicates that—at least at the beginning of the narrative—Nemo truly believes that roaming the seas in a submarine is a better form of freedom than life on ground, governed as it is by laws and norms that he finds reprehensible. Arronax conveys this idea through his observation, “In the strictest sense of the word, [Nemo] was free, because he was outside the reach of the moral code.”

Ultimately, the novel shows that there is no such thing as freedom without constraints. While in the *Nautilus* the men may be physically constrained as well as constrained by being placed under Nemo’s rule, on land they would be constrained by a different set of physical and social laws. While this does not excuse Nemo’s act of capturing and confining the men, it also encourages the reader to consider which forms of freedom are more desirable: the freedom of shunning conventional life and human society in favor of exploring the open ocean, or the freedom to conduct a “normal” life without the direct imposition of another person’s whims.



HUMAN INTELLIGENCE AND ITS LIMITS

The two main characters in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*—Captain Nemo and Professor Arronax—are both highly intelligent, and

the novel explores the value and significance of human knowledge. None of what either Nemo or Arronax achieves would be possible without their unusually advanced intelligence, and thus the novel indicates that intelligence can be important and transformative. At the same time, there are also clear limits to the intelligence of all the characters in the novel, as well as a forceful indication that intelligence isn’t everything. For example, the behavior of several characters, particularly Nemo, illustrates that high intelligence does not necessarily align with increased happiness or morality (indeed, the opposite can actually be true). Moreover, even the most intelligent humans can still behave in a foolish manner. Ultimately, human intelligence pales in comparison to the complex, fearsome mysteries of the natural world, and the novel suggests that it is important for humans not to become so hubristic that they allow themselves to believe they are particularly intelligent on the scale of all creation.

In the case of both Nemo and Arronax, their unusual intelligence makes it possible for them to leave a uniquely exhilarating kind of life. Trained as a medical doctor, Arronax becomes a naturalist with particular expertise in the deep sea. This career provides him with opportunities to travel the world in service of the pursuit of knowledge, which he appears to care about above anything else. On a similar note, Nemo’s

intelligence means that he has the ability and resources to construct the *Nautilus* and abandon human society in order to live on it. Both men devote themselves to exploring the world—both in a literal, geographic sense, and in the sense of analyzing their surroundings.

Yet there are also obvious downsides to Nemo and Arronax’s intelligence. In both cases, the men’s intelligence distances them from the rest of society, isolating them from others. Indeed, it is arguably for this reason that the men develop such a close friendship, one that survives bursts of mutual suspicion and even dislike. Nemo and Arronax connect over their discussions of nature, history, geography, and philosophy, and in doing so establish a profoundly deep bond. Yet this bond is arguably a toxic one since it is grounded on Nemo’s nonconsensual capture and confinement of Arronax, and even leads Arronax to develop a Stockholm syndrome-like affection for his captor even after it becomes obvious that he would be better off fleeing the *Nautilus* and returning to land.

Furthermore, the novel also shows that not everyone’s intelligence is valued in the same way as the two main characters. Conseil, for example, is frequently described as highly intelligent and “learned,” yet because he is Arronax’s servant he is not afforded much respect as a thinker in his own right. Despite his natural capabilities, the class system into which Conseil is born limits what is possible for him to pursue in life. All evidence suggests that he is at least as intelligent as Arronax, yet he is still forced to permanently remain in Arronax’s shadow. On a similar note, Arronax haughtily labels the indigenous Papuan people “savages,” indicating that he believes they have inferior intelligence to white men like himself. Of course, in reality this is not true, and is simply a product of the racist, colonial ideology to which Arronax subscribes. Indeed, this in itself becomes proof of the limits of intelligence. While Arronax is one of the wisest and highest-educated men within his own culture, his adherence to false and foolish racist ideology starkly reveals the limits of the system of knowledge of which he is part.



EXPLORATION, IMPERIALISM, AND CONQUEST

Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea takes place during the peak of the age of imperialism, at a time

when global colonial exploration was drawing to a close and most of the world had been “conquered” by imperial powers. Several characters in the novel—including Nemo and Arronax—want to travel and conquer the world, including the mysterious, unexplored depths of the deep sea. Indeed, in a moment in which most of the land has already been “discovered” and occupied by colonial powers, the deep sea remains one of the few unexplored regions left on Earth, and thus comes to represent the exciting and terrifying possibilities of new territory. Yet while the novel foregrounds the colonial

impulses of exploration and conquest, it also makes references to the reality of imperialism as a force of brutality and injustice. The result is a rather confused, contradictory depiction of exploration, imperialism, and conquest that reflects the ambivalence felt by many citizens of colonial powers in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

On one level, the desire animating all the major characters in the novel can be read as a straightforwardly imperial wish to explore and conquer every part of the globe. Captain Nemo spends his time travelling the oceans and discovering regions heretofore unexplored by humans, and Arronax enthusiastically joins this mission, hoping to document, name, and categorize all the plant and animal life that can be found in the deep sea. These activities closely parallel the pursuits of Western imperialists, whose occupation of colonized land not only involved resource extraction but also the imposition of new names and categories on the local environment. Even Ned Land, the Canadian harpooner, can be read as possessing an imperial desire: his determination to overpower marine life is an assertion of human control over the natural landscape, which was one of the defining features of Western colonial ideology.

A colonialist attitude is also evident in Arronax's bigoted, violent view toward indigenous people, particularly the Papuan people whom he and the others encounter while moored on the Papuan islands. Arronax calls the indigenous Papuan people "savages," and characterizes them as brutal and animalistic. He frames their aggression toward himself, Conseil, and Ned as unwarranted, despite the fact that the three men are trespassers on Papuan land who hunt the local game without any respect for the inhabitants of the land. Arronax's fear of the Papuan people—and his dismissive rejection of their invitation to join them, which is courteously extended even after he initially trespassed on their land—represents the mix of unwarranted fear and hostility that tends to characterize the colonial attitude toward indigenous people, alongside the unjustified moves to innocence and victimhood on the part of the colonizers.

Yet while the novel frequently falls back on colonial tropes such as the depiction of indigenous people as "savages," it also contains criticisms of colonial attitudes and practices. The person most critical of imperialism is Nemo, who toward the end of the novel is revealed to have been personally victimized by an unnamed imperial nation. Indeed, Nemo's own experiences at the hands of colonizers are so traumatizing that they lead him to renounce all of human society and retreat into the sea. He explicitly aligns himself with the oppressed races of the world, claiming to be "one" with colonized peoples. (Nemo's ethnic identity remains ambiguous—in early drafts of the novel he was depicted as a Polish nobleman, but Verne subsequently revised this. Some readers and critics have interpreted Nemo as being of Indian origin.)

Depending on one's perspective, the novel could be interpreted as simply conveying the imperialist attitudes of the time. Far from manifesting in a straightforward manner, these attitudes often took an internally contradictory form, often incorporating criticism of colonial exploitation, injustice, and brutality at the same time as they perpetuated these issues. On the other hand, the novel could also be read as an assault on the straightforward binary between colonizer and colonized. The micro-community formed on the *Nautilus* is arguably representative of the complex, contradictory systems of power that flourished under colonialism. Nemo, the despotic yet at times compassionate ruler, seizes the freedom of others after having been personally violated by an imperial power. Meanwhile, Arronax—himself a captive—initially collaborates with Nemo and, in doing so, occupies the highest position of power on the submarine after that of Nemo himself. This intricate and conflicting system of power relations can be read as a metaphor for the social systems colonialism imposed on colonized societies.



NATURE VS. CIVILIZATION

Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea depicts a man—Captain Nemo—who chooses to exile himself from human society and spend the rest of his life exploring the ocean, having minimal contact with other people. When he captures three men from another ship, the *Abraham Lincoln*, he welcomes them on board his submarine, the *Nautilus*, and asserts that they may never return to civilization again. While this is clearly an extreme fate, the novel expresses some sympathy for Nemo's preference for nature over human society. Through its lengthy descriptions of underwater plant and animal life, the novel emphatically foregrounds the wonders of the natural world and depicts human civilization as less exciting and profound than nature. Yet it also disrupts the idea that there is a strong binary between nature and civilization through its depiction of Nemo, who uses advanced scientific technology in order to immerse himself in the natural world.

Professor Arronax lives in Paris, France—the heart of what was considered "civilization" in the Western world of 1868, when the novel takes place. Nonetheless, due to Arronax's profession he is drawn toward the natural world, which is what leads him to initially accept the invitation to board the *Abraham Lincoln* in pursuit of a "narwhal." Crucially, he embarks on this expedition instead of returning directly to his urban, sophisticated life in Paris. Of course, this ends up being a much more dramatically consequential choice than Arronax originally anticipated. Rather than spending a few days or weeks on the *Abraham Lincoln* before going home, Arronax finds himself totally removed from civilization and cast into exile in the natural world due to Nemo's insistence that no one from the "civilized" world find out about his submarine. For Nemo, the pull of

nature and the contrast between nature and civilization is so powerful that the self-imposed exile in which he lives must be permanent. Nature is not something that can be incorporated as a facet of an otherwise ordinary, “civilized” life, but rather is totally all-consuming. For Nemo, renouncing civilization and immersing oneself in nature is a unidirectional process that cannot be reversed.

It is also important to take note of the ways in which the novel reiterates 19-century associations between nature and indigenous people (who are referred to with the offensive epithet “savages” in the novel). This is contrasted against Western colonizers, who were characterized as bringing “civilization” to indigenous communities. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the rapid advancement of urbanization, industrialization, colonization, and scientific technology led some Westerners to argue that the project of “civilization” was accelerating at too fast a pace and that it was important for society to return to a more natural, “primitive” way of being, which they framed as being embodied by indigenous populations. Although Nemo’s nationality and ethnic background remains unclear he positions himself as someone who rejects the modern world in order to return to a pre-“civilized” way of being.

At the same time, Nemo’s reliance on scientific technology disrupts the binary between nature and civilization. Nemo uses the most advanced technologies available in order to live a simulated version of a natural lifestyle. This is encapsulated by tools such as the Rouquayrol apparatus, an iron oxygen tank worn as a kind of backpack that allows a person to swim underwater for extended periods of time. The Rouquayrol apparatus is an example of technology being used to artificially engineer a more organic, intimate relation between humans and nature. These contradictions indicate that it is harder to draw a clear line between nature and civilization than it might appear.

A significant percentage of the novel is dedicated to reverent descriptions of the natural world, which highlights the significance and majesty of nature, elevating it to a more important position than “civilization.” At the same time, Arronax’s scientific perspective once again disrupts the binary between civilization and nature. Arronax is fascinated by the natural world, and spends most of his time on the *Nautilus* gazing at the plants and animals visible around him. Yet rather than simply observing this marine life, he and Conseil dedicate themselves to naming and categorizing it. This is an example of the imposition of “civilization” on the natural world. While Arronax may love nature, he arguably doesn’t love it for what the messy, terrifying reality that it is. His intense fear of sharks, for example, suggests that he prefers for the natural world to exist under human control. This indicates that even ardent nature-lovers (including professional naturalists) do not necessarily love nature for what it is, but rather love a sanitized,

“civilized” version of it.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



ELECTRICITY

Electricity represents the formidable, seemingly infinite opportunity and power provided by scientific innovation and technology. As such, electricity encapsulates both the fear and optimism about technology that are expressed within the novel. Captain Nemo’s submarine, the *Nautilus*, is powered by electricity. When the *Nautilus* is first spotted by various ships around the globe, it is mistaken for a “phosphorescent” narwhal because of the way it is illuminated by electricity. The fact that people who see the submarine assume that it is naturally rather than artificially illuminated indicates that, on some subconscious level, they have greater faith in the power of nature than in that of manmade objects. The revelation that the *Nautilus* isn’t a narwhal at all, but an electrically-powered submarine, thus becomes a commentary on the ways in which human invention is catching up to the power of nature. Indeed, all the mysteries surrounding the submarine—including its illumination, its speed, and its agility—end up being explained by the fact that it is electrically powered. This reflects a somewhat naïve impression of electricity and what it can do, influenced by the heady excitement over this new form of power.

From a contemporary perspective, the fact that the submarine is electrically powered does not appear particularly advanced or impressive, and doesn’t answer many questions about the way the vessel actually works. However, in the mid-19th century during which the novel is set, electricity was a new enough source of power that there was an outsize sense of exhilaration and optimism about what it was capable of achieving. This disproportionate excitement is expressed in the novel’s giddy representation of electricity as an infinitely expansive, potent, and magical force.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Thrift Editions edition of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* published in 2006.

Part 1, Chapter 1 Quotes

☞☞ And that it *did* exist was undeniable. There was no longer any disposition to class it in the list of fabulous creatures. The human mind is ever hungry to believe in new and marvellous phenomena, and so it is easy for us to understand the vast excitement produced throughout the whole world by this supernatural apparition.

Related Characters: Professor Pierre Arronax (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis



The as-yet-unnamed narrator has explained that in 1866, the whole world became fixated on rumors of a strange series of events that occurred at sea. A long, thin, “phosphorescent” object was spotted in the water moving at a very fast speed. In this quotation, the narrator—who the reader will later learn is a scientist named Professor Pierre Arronax—emphasizes that the creature certainly did exist, and that people were fascinated by it because it was new, mysterious, and totally unfamiliar.

Arronax’s words capture broad trends in the global public mindset during the mid-19th century. At this time, new scientific discoveries are constantly being made, and major shifts in people’s understanding of how the world works—such as that triggered by Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection—are making the world seem unfamiliar to those who live in it. As a result, people are prepared to believe in extraordinary things, including the mysterious creature spotted underwater. At the same time, there is a playful element to the narrator’s insistence that the creature did really exist. The reader, after all, knows that they are reading a novel, and thus this insistence can be seen as a wink to the fictional status of the overall story yet a confirmation that, within the boundaries of its invented world, the monster is indeed “real.”

Part 1, Chapter 2 Quotes

☞☞ Thus may we explain this inexplicable animal, unless there exists in reality nothing at all, despite what has already been conjectured, seen, perceived, and experienced. Which condition is, of course, just within the bounds of possibility.

Related Characters: Professor Pierre Arronax (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has introduced himself as Professor Pierre Arronax, a naturalist who is an expert in the deep sea. Due to his expertise, Arronax is consulted regarding a mysterious sea monster, and provides an excerpt from an article he writes for the *New York Herald* sharing his opinion. This paragraph is the conclusion of Arronax’s article, which he goes on to call cowardly, explaining that he wrote it in order to save his reputation as a scientist. The quotation is significant because it provides an explicit meditation on the boundaries of reality and the limits of imagination. In this sense, it can be read as a metafictional reflection on the science-fiction genre.

This becomes even more significant when one recalls that *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* is known as one of the earliest science-fiction novels. In writing it, Verne helped inaugurate a new genre with a very particular set of rules regarding the depiction of possibility, plausibility, and reality. One of the factors that distinguishes science fiction from fantasy is the requirement that the world of a science fiction novel can be scientifically explained. (There is thus usually no magic in science fiction, but instead technology.) This quotation from Arronax thus can be read as a veiled reflection on the status of the emerging genre that the novel helped create.

Part 1, Chapter 8 Quotes

☞☞ “By the pluck!” he fumed. “Here are people as badly off as the Scotch for hospitality. They are gentle as cannibals. And I shouldn’t be surprised if they were man-eaters. But I’ll be right there when they start to swallow me.”

Related Characters: Ned Land (speaker), Conseil

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

After the *Abraham Lincoln*’s encounter with the underwater “monster,” Arronax and his servant, Conseil, were thrown into the sea, and almost drowned. However, they then wake to find themselves on board the monster, which they immediately realize is not a creature at all, but a submarine. Indeed, they are actually being held captive by mysterious men in masks, with whom they have attempted to communicate without success. In this quotation, Ned



expresses his horror at the way he and his crewmates have been treated. Importantly, he compares the behavior of their captors to “cannibals.”

This comparison is significant because it betrays how powerful negative ideas about indigenous people were in the 19th century when the novel was written. The belief that indigenous people subject to colonization were brutal, primitive “cannibals” and “savages” was extremely widespread. Indeed, it helped justify the extreme violence and injustice exerted on these peoples by imaginatively reversing the direction in which this violence was occurring. In a sense, this is also what is occurring in Ned’s statement. The reality is that the *Abraham Lincoln* hunted down and attacked the vessel (which it took for a monster). The three men are now being held captive aboard it, but likely wouldn’t be there if they hadn’t attacked in the first place.

Part 1, Chapter 10 Quotes

●● A flash of anger and contempt kindled in the eyes of the Unknown, and I had a fleeting vision of some terrible past in the life of this man. Not only had he put himself beyond the pale of human laws, but he had made himself independent of them. In the strictest sense of the word, he was free, because he was outside the reach of the moral code.

Related Characters: Professor Pierre Arronax (speaker), Captain Nemo

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis



Having initially declined to communicate with the three men he captured from the *Abraham Lincoln* naval ship, Captain Nemo has revealed that he did actually understand what they were trying to tell him, as he speaks all of the languages they used (plus more). He has also claimed that the *Nautilus* has never actively targeted another ship, but rather only defended itself from the attacks of others. The shape of Nemo’s life is emerging: he lives permanently at sea in the submarine, having escaped from human society in self-imposed exile. In this quotation, Arronax reflects on Nemo’s state of absolute freedom.

There is a palpable lack of envy in Arronax’s estimation of Nemo’s life. He claims that Nemo is free “in the strictest sense of the word,” indicating that, although he lives outside of the law, there are other important ways in which Nemo

isn’t free. Indeed, perhaps the most obvious of these ways is that he is confined to a submarine and has restricted himself from engaging in many of the most fundamental human activities, instead isolating himself to a rather artificial life in the ocean. The rest of the novel thus explores the extent to which Nemo and his captives could truly be considered free, and at what price this freedom comes.

●● “Yes, sir, I love it! The sea is everything. It covers seven-tenths of the terrestrial globe. Its breath is pure and life-giving. It is an immense desert place where man is never lonely, for he sense the weaving of Creation on every hand. It is the physical embodiment of a supernatural existence.”

Related Characters: Captain Nemo (speaker), Professor Pierre Arronax

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

Nemo has told Arronax that he, Ned, and Conseil will be able to have a free life aboard the *Nautilus* as long as they agree to one condition: to return to their cabins if Nemo asks them to do so. Following a tentative agreement from Arronax, Nemo has been explaining his life on the *Nautilus*. In this quotation, he discusses his passionate love for the ocean, which he sees as a place of ultimate harmony and freedom. Nemo’s subtle invocation of religious belief is important, since religion does not play a major role in the novel and does not appear to be a significant element of the lives of the characters. As this quotation suggests, the most significant way the characters express religious belief is through interactions with nature and the feelings of awe this triggers.

Nemo’s other reasons for loving the ocean are also important. The fact that the sea covers 70 percent of Earth’s surface yet is an “immense desert” depicts this realm as a mysterious, unexplored terrain akin to outer space. Meanwhile, Nemo’s assertion that a person can’t be lonely at sea is counterintuitive, considering he has also just noted that it is deserted. Yet for Nemo, loneliness seems to be a condition produced by the alienation of modern human society rather than a natural state. Indeed, he argues that it is impossible to feel lonely while also being at one with nature.

Part 1, Chapter 17 Quotes

☛☛ Monstrous brutes that could crush a whole man with one snap of their iron jaws! I do not know if Conseil, with true scientific ardour, stopped to classify them. But, for my part, I could not but note their silver bellies, their huge maws bristling with teeth, and thought of these from a most unscientific point of view. I regarded myself more as a possible victim than as a naturalist.

Related Characters: Professor Pierre Arronax (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

Nemo has invited Arronax, Ned, and Conseil to a hunting expedition in the forests of Crespo. It is then revealed that the forests of Crespo are actually underwater, on the ocean floor. Led by Nemo, the men explore the forests, and during the expedition Nemo kills both a sea spider and a sea otter. As they journey back to the *Nautilus*, they encounter two man-eating sharks. Here Arronax describes the sharks, noting how his extreme fear of them corrupts his scientific perspective. His humorous comment that he views himself “more as a possible victim than as a naturalist” is a reminder that all scientists are also human, and are thus subject to the bias created by human emotions.

Arronax’s description of his fear overcoming his scientific curiosity is a recurring motif in the book. Throughout the narrative, Arronax is drawn to that which terrifies him. In a sense, this is a positive quality, as it allows him to brave frightening circumstances in pursuit of scientific research. However, as this quotation shows, even Arronax’s scientific curiosity has limits.

Part 1, Chapter 22 Quotes

☛☛ “Why are you so astonished, M. Arronax, at meeting savages when you set foot on a strange land? Where in all the earth are there not savages? And do you for a moment suppose them worse than other men, these fellows that you call savages?”

Related Characters: Captain Nemo (speaker), Professor Pierre Arronax

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

After an incident wherein the *Nautilus* strikes land, Arronax, Conseil, and Ned spend a few days exploring a Papuan island. There, they hunt birds and mammals, before being attacked by indigenous people whom Arronax refers to as “savages.” Back on the boat, Arronax tells Nemo what happened. In this quotation, Nemo questions Arronax’s use of the term “savages.” He points out that Arronax’s horror over encountering them is unwarranted, given that the island is the indigenous people’s home.

In one sense, Nemo’s words could be interpreted as a rebuke against the racism that is implicit within the term “savages” and Arronax’s general attitude toward indigenous people. As Nemo indicates, the assumption that the island’s indigenous inhabitants are inferior to other people is unfounded bigotry. At the same time, Nemo’s perspective seems to emerge less from sympathy with the indigenous islanders and more from his belief that *all* humans—at least all those who live on land—are “savage.”

Part 1, Chapter 23 Quotes

☛☛ We were growing fast to our shell like snails, and I swear it must be easy to lead a snail’s existence. Thus, our undersea life began to seem natural to us, and we no longer thought of the days we used to spend on land.

Related Characters: Professor Pierre Arronax (speaker), Conseil, Ned Land

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 115-116

Explanation and Analysis

Having been aboard the *Nautilus* for many months, Arronax, Conseil, and Ned have had their share of terrifying, exhilarating, bewildering, and mundane experiences. While they were initially horrified by the idea of being confined to the submarine (particularly considering that Captain Nemo told them they would be on it for the rest of their lives), in this quotation Arronax describes how they have grown accustomed to their fate. This quotation perpetuates the sense of ambiguity around whether the submarine should be counted as a home or a prison, which emerges through the metaphor of a snail’s shell—something that both confines the animal and provides it with shelter and a safer mode of transport.



Arronax’s words speak to the extent to which humans adapt to the situation in which they find themselves, however

unusual and unappealing this situation might eventually seem. In light of the technological advances that allow Nemo and the others to survive indefinitely on the *Nautilus* in the first place, this quotation also prompts reflection about the kinds of adaptations humans might make in the future. In light of the *Twenty Thousand Leagues's* place within the canon of science fiction, a modern reading of the novel might question that if it is possible to become accustomed to living underwater in a submarine, does this mean that humans will be able to just as easily adapt to living in outer space?

Part 2, Chapter 3 Quotes

☞ “That Indian, my dear sir, is a member of an oppressed race. And I still am and ever shall be one with all such people.”

Related Characters: Captain Nemo (speaker), Professor Pierre Arronax

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 142-143

Explanation and Analysis



In the Bay of Bengal, Nemo brings Arronax, Conseil, and Ned on a pearl-diving trip. They encounter spectacular pearls, and see an Indian pearl diver at work. The man is almost killed by a shark until Nemo intervenes, nearly sacrificing his own life in order to save the life of this stranger. After the incident is over, Arronax reflects on why Nemo performed such a courageous and selfless act, and ends up asking. The quotation listed here is Nemo's response; rather than arguing that he would have done the same for anyone, Nemo specifically cites the fact that the diver was Indian (and thus “a member of an oppressed race”) as the reason why he saved him.

Nemo's answer is a key moment in the novel's exploration of imperialism and injustice. The novel is set in the mid-19th century, during the height of British rule in India. The exploitation and brutality that characterized British colonial rule caused unimaginable suffering to Indians like the pearl diver. Nemo's sympathy with the diver indicates that he is opposed to the atrocities of Western domination over indigenous lands and resources. Indeed, some readers and critics of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* interpret Nemo himself as being of Indian origin. Those who favor this interpretation might see Nemo's claim to be “one” with the diver as evidence that he is also from India, or perhaps from another nation that is oppressed by colonial rule.

Part 2, Chapter 8 Quotes

☞ “Freedom may come high, but it's worth paying for [...] Who knows but that tomorrow we may be a hundred leagues away? Let chance but favor us, sir, and by ten or eleven o'clock we shall have landed on terra firma, dead or alive.”

Related Characters: Ned Land (speaker), Professor Pierre Arronax

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

For the first time since its encounter with the *Abraham Lincoln*, the *Nautilus* has passed through European waters. Ned had been hoping that this would provide an opportunity for him, Arronax, and Conseil to escape, but they ended up moving through the Mediterranean too quickly, and are now back in the Atlantic Ocean. However, Ned has just revealed to Arronax that the escape plan is going ahead, despite the risks involved. Here he emphatically states that even though the odds are not in their favor, they must take the risk of attempting to escape because the promise of freedom is worth it.

Ned's words in this quotation certainly sound courageous and noble, and one can hardly blame him for attempting to return to his old life at all costs, rather than spending the rest of his days on earth in a submarine with a tiny number of people. At the same time, it is intriguing that for Ned, freedom decidedly rests on “terra firma,” whereas Captain Nemo characterizes life on the land as absolutely unfree. For Nemo, the only hope of living a free life is to escape the arbitrary cruelty of human laws and roam the ocean forever. Yet as Ned makes clear in this passage, he would rather die than not seize his one opportunity to flee his existence on the *Nautilus*.

☞ It was an unforgettably sad day that I then passed, torn between the desire of regaining my freedom and my dislike of abandoning the marvelous ship and thus leaving my undersea studies incomplete.

Related Characters: Professor Pierre Arronax (speaker), Captain Nemo, Ned Land

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 172



Explanation and Analysis

Ned has approached Arronax with a plan to escape the *Nautilus*. This creates a dilemma for Arronax, as he wants to live freely again but is also enchanted by the “marvelous ship” and the opportunities the submarine provides for his undersea research as a naturalist. In this sense, the vessel provides both freedom and confinement for Arronax—it enables him to traverse the deep sea in a matter he would never be able to achieve otherwise, yet Captain Nemo’s strict conditions for Arronax as the others prevent them from coming and going freely. Thus, the novel seems to suggest that there is no such thing as either total freedom or constraint—any given situation is a tradeoff of both.

Arronax’s thoughts also show that he is prepared to engage in a level of self-sacrifice in service of a greater project, which is something of a motif for both Arronax and Nemo. Arronax is so dedicated to his research that he is willing to give up his own freedom—as well as his entire life back on land—in order to complete his research, indicating that he cares more about the expansion of scientific knowledge than about his own life.

“I had long guessed that, whatever motive had led him to seek freedom at the bottom of the ocean, it had not been an ignoble one. I had seen that his heart still beat for the sorrows of humanity, and sensed that his immense charity was for oppressed races as well as individuals.”

Related Characters: Professor Pierre Arronax (speaker), Captain Nemo, Ned Land

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

Ned has approached Arronax with a plan to escape the *Nautilus*. Arronax, worried about the mission failing and unsure if he even wants to leave, feebly points out that the sea is rough. However, Ned remains resolute, leaving Arronax to miserably reflect on the dilemma before him. Here, Arronax states that his choice is essentially between his own freedom and his scientific research. The fact that he considers this a dilemma proves how dedicated he is to the pursuit of knowledge, which—depending on the reader’s perspective—could be seen as either noble or foolish and self-destructive.

Here, Arronax reflects on Nemo’s reasons for choosing to live a life of self-imposed exile. Although Arronax still

doesn’t know what these reasons are, exactly, he believes that they are well-founded and based in Nemo’s compassion for “humanity,” and particularly for members of oppressed classes. It might seem strange or unclear why feeling sympathy for oppressed peoples would lead a person to retreat to an undersea life on a submarine, yet there is actually a tradition of people whose horror at the injustices of the world leads them to retreat from society entirely and attempt to live in solitude according to their own principles.

Part 2, Chapter 11 Quotes

“What a beautiful situation to be in!” I chortled. “To overrun regions where man has never trod, depths to which even dead or inanimate matter may never more descend! Look, Captain, at these magnificent rocks, these uninhabitable grottoes. Here are the lowest known receptacles of the globe, where life is not only impossible unthinkable. What unknown sights are here? Why should we be unable to find and preserve some visible evidence of our journey as a souvenir?”

Related Characters: Professor Pierre Arronax (speaker), Captain Nemo

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

The *Nautilus* is passing through the Atlantic Ocean at a steady speed. Having been held captive on the submarine for some time, Arronax has been considering raising the question of his freedom to Nemo—though he worries how Nemo will react. Deep underwater, Arronax spies a spectacular mountain range. Here, he reflects on how amazing it is to witness sights that no other human has or likely will see, and expresses a desire to have “visible evidence” of these sights as a “souvenir.” Arronax’s words are a hint directed toward Nemo regarding the possibility of their freedom. After all, if Arronax and the others are really to be confined to the submarine for the rest of their lives as Nemo intends, then there wouldn’t be much valuable in having “souvenirs” from their travels.

This quotation also contains a reflection on the special appeal of undersea exploration. It is obvious that Arronax takes a particular pleasure in knowing that the sights before him have never passed before the eyes of another human—and perhaps never will again. This connects Arronax’s feelings about the undersea landscape to the feelings of colonial explorers during the “Age of Discovery” in the 15th through 17th centuries. During this period,

much was made of the idea of “virgin” lands that had never been seen by Western eyes before. Of course, this desire to conquer and explore every region of the globe often involved the violent erasure of indigenous people as well as animals and natural landscapes, all of whose existence was discounted as less important than that of the Western colonizers.

Part 2, Chapter 14 Quotes

“I, Captain Nemo, on this 21st day of March, 1868, have reached the South Pole on the 90th degree. And I hereby take possession of this portion of the globe, equal in extent to one-sixth of the continents now known to man.”

“In whose name, sir?” I asked.

“In my own, M. Arronax.”

Related Characters: Professor Pierre Arronax, Captain Nemo (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

The long journey of the *Nautilus* has brought the submarine to the South Pole. Arronax, Nemo, and the others have managed to ascertain that they are indeed at the exact point of the South Pole, and were overjoyed to learn this result. In the aftermath of that happy occasion, Nemo officially “take[s] possession” of the South Pole. This is a somewhat surprising moment, as earlier in the novel there have been hints that Nemo is opposed to the brutality and injustice of colonialism. While he is obviously not hurting anyone or enacting any legitimate law in officially naming himself the owner of the South Pole, it is a gesture that nonetheless directly recalls the acts of colonizers who take possession of land under no authority other than their own.

Given Nemo’s attitude toward the ocean, it is also arguably surprising that he believes in the concept of owning territory at all—particularly territory so abstract and uninhabitable as the South Pole. It is thus possible to interpret this moment as being somewhat tongue-in-cheek—perhaps an example of Nemo mocking colonizers,

rather than genuinely taking part in their actions. Yet at the same time, Nemo has also proven himself to be something of a despot as he has kept Arronax and his companions prisoners aboard the *Nautilus*. Indeed, these stark contradictions are an important part of Nemo’s mysterious, ambiguous personality as someone who values both total freedom from the bounds of society and tight control over his surroundings.

Part 2, Chapter 16 Quotes

“Around the “Nautilus,” above and below it, was an impenetrable wall of ice. We were prisoners to the Great Ice Barrier.”

Related Characters: Professor Pierre Arronax (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 223

Explanation and Analysis

At the South Pole, Nemo has boldly decided to drive the *Nautilus* under the Great Ice Barrier. Both he and Arronax had hesitations about this plan, but ended up assuring themselves it would be alright. However, due to an unforeseeable accident, the submarine has ended up trapped by ice on every side. This brief quotation explicitly links this episode to the novel’s exploration of what it means to be free versus confined.

Captain Nemo built the *Nautilus* in order to escape from the evils of human society, and in doing so he has achieved a particular kind of total freedom. He roams around the whole world, unimpeded by laws, norms, and expectations, and explores areas unpopulated by other humans. However, this adventure leads to him getting very literally trapped, made a prisoner by nature. This could be interpreted as a problem of hubris, a dramatic reminder that Nemo overestimates his own power over nature. At the same time, perhaps an incident like this is simply the price of radical freedom—there is always a risk that things can go terribly wrong, and in a remote setting such as this, there is none of the protection or aid that comes along with living in a society.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1, CHAPTER 1: A SHIFTING REEF

A fantastic, mysterious event happened in the year 1866, which is still generally considered to be “inexplicable.” Rumors spread about the event, particularly among sailors, captain, merchants, imperial officers, and others whose live and work at sea. For some time, ships at sea observed an enormously long, thin, “phosphorescent” object that moved at an incredibly fast speed.

On July 20, 1866, five miles off the Australian coast, a British imperial ship named the *Governor Higginson* encountered a “moving mass.” A similar encounter took place three days later in the Pacific Ocean, which indicated that whatever animal the *Governor Higginson* encountered could move at an incredible speed. Two weeks later and 2,000 leagues away from the second event, two steamers in the Atlantic also encountered the mysterious mass. Once news spread of these occurrences, the public began to joke about the phenomenon, but others approached the matter with grave seriousness. The sea “monster” was depicted in newspapers, songs, and theatrical performances. Scientists also weighed in, and arguments erupted over different interpretations of what the monster was.

Eventually, the chief writer of a celebrated satirical magazine gave a “death blow” to the monster through making fun of it. As a result, by the beginning of 1867 thoughts of the monster had left people’s minds. However, in March the monster was thrust back into the spotlight in an entirely new form: this time, it took the shape of an entire island. On March 5, a Quebecois passenger ship unexpectedly struck a rock at five a.m., breaking the ship’s keel. Three weeks later, the exact same thing happened to another ship, the *Scotia*. Soon after the collision, the *Scotia*’s captain found a leak in the ship’s fifth compartment, which was soon traced to a hole in the ship’s bottom.

The *Scotia* continued on its course, but once it had safely arrived at its destination a shocking discovery was made: the hole in the ship’s bottom was a perfect triangle shape, as if it had been drilled by a mechanical tool. Following this discovery, the public imagination went wild. All shipwrecks in history were suddenly blamed on the mysterious “monster” that bore the hole inside the *Scotia*, and people demanded that the creature be destroyed immediately.

This paragraph introduces the fact that the novel is centrally concerned with the ocean, and posits the ocean as a source of global intrigue. In the world of the novel, the ocean represents a mysterious, fascinating, and often terrifying part of existence.



This passage explores the diverse ways in which people choose to interpret the world—and particularly inexplicable objects like the unidentified mass. Although many might assume that scientific explanations are the most useful in such a situation, the mention of pop culture and media reminds the reader that these more creative, less rational outlets of interpretation are no less important to the general population.



This passage indicates that the monster achieved a kind of reality in people’s minds. The vast majority of people who heard about the creature didn’t directly witness it, and thus their only access to it was via rumor, discussion, and imagination. This meant that the monster could be “killed” simply by people no longer taking it seriously.



Here the monster comes to serve a useful role: it becomes the missing piece of the puzzle for unresolved mysteries such as shipwrecks. This further emphasizes the idea that the monster has a more significant presence in people’s minds than it does in reality.



PART 1, CHAPTER 2: TWO SIDES OF AN ARGUMENT

During this time, the narrator (Pierre Arronax) returns to New York from a scientific expedition in Nebraska. He is an assistant professor at the Museum of Natural History in Paris, and spent half a year in Nebraska on the orders of the French government. Arronax is immediately aware that the incident involving the *Scotia* is one of the most important issues of the time. People do not believe that the mass the ships encountered is an island, because if this were true, it wouldn't have been able to move at such great speed. Instead, people theorize that the *Scotia* collided with a gigantic shipwreck.

Different governments around the world all insist that they had no involvement with the mysterious mass, and after extensive inquiries, it is declared that the mass could not possibly be a submarine built by any national military. As the author of a book entitled *Mysteries of the Unsounded Depths Undersea*, Arronax is asked for advice. On April 30, the *New York Herald* publishes an article in which Arronax shares his view on the matter. He claims that, if the monster is a type of being already known to humanity, then it is probably an enormous narwhal. Theoretically, such a gigantic narwhal would have a tusk that could create the hole discovered in the *Scotia* and other ships that collided with the "monster."

Arronax concludes that he supports the notion that the monster is a narwhal, unless it doesn't exist at all, which is unlikely but possible. He explains that he arrived at this cautious conclusion because he does not want to risk losing his good reputation as a scientist. Following Arronax's statement, there was a frenzy of speculation regarding what mysterious, fantastical creature could be living undetected in the ocean.

The U.S. is the first country to launch a search for the monster, and does so with aggressive enthusiasm. However, from this point on the monster is nowhere to be found. Finally, on June 2, a steamer heading to Shanghai from San Francisco encounters the creature again. Arronax is immediately invited to board a U.S. naval ship, the *Abraham Lincoln*, to join the search for it.

Narrating Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea through the perspective of a scientist significantly shapes how the story is imparted to the reader. Rather than having a narrator with naïve or limited knowledge—and thus partially restricting the reader's access to the novel's events—a scientist narrator has an unusually high level of expertise, meaning that the reader should theoretically get the most informed version of the story.



Here the reader is reminded that, while Arronax might be an expert with an unusually extensive knowledge of the deep sea, he doesn't know what the monster is for sure. Like others, all he can do is speculate. Importantly, his speculation should be better informed than a layman's interpretation. Yet faced with such a mysterious object, it's debatable whether it's even possible to engage in rational and realistic speculation.



This passage hints at the limitations of scientific knowledge, particularly for explaining totally unknown and unprecedented phenomena. Arronax has to make a cautious, rational guess in order to protect his reputation as a scientist—yet it's possible that a more outlandish and imaginative approach might be necessary.



At this point, it's clear that the search for the monster is incredibly significant not just for the public and the scientific community, but for the U.S. military. At this point in the mid-19th century, exploration, scientific discovery, and the mysteries of the unknown are of the utmost importance to all realms of society.



PART 1, CHAPTER 3: I MAKE MY DECISION

While Arronax had previously never considered joining the search for the monster, as soon as he receives the invitation from the U.S. Navy he suddenly feels that it is his life's purpose to find the monster and remove it from the ocean. He calls on his servant, Conseil, a "faithful and devoted Flemish boy" who has accompanied Arronax everywhere he goes for the past 10 years. Conseil is 30 years old, 10 years younger than Arronax himself. Now, Arronax tells Conseil to immediately pack his trunk for a journey, explaining that it will be a detour on their route home to France.

Having boarded the *Abraham Lincoln*, Arronax introduces himself to an officer, Commander Farragut, who welcomes him on board. The ship embarks immediately, moving full steam ahead. Thousands of people see it off, cheering and waving handkerchiefs. Before long, the ship leaves American waters and enters the darkness of the Atlantic.

This passage establishes a parallel between Arronax and Conseil: both of them are totally devoted to their work. In Arronax's case, this means throwing himself into scientific research, whereas for Conseil, it means serving Arronax. In this sense, both their lives are dedicated to scientific research, because Conseil's servitude makes Arronax's scientific work possible.



The departure of the Abraham Lincoln is a major event. People's interest in the monster and desire for it to be found is likely motivated by a mix of curiosity, aggression, and fear.



PART 1, CHAPTER 4: NED LAND

Captain Farragut has an absolute, irrational faith in the existence of the monster. He is convinced that only he or the creature will survive his encounter with it. The other officers share his attitude, and keep their eyes fixed on the ocean. Farragut has offered a reward of \$2,000 to the first man to catch sight of the monster. Arronax is similarly enthusiastic in his search for the creature. Every possible kind of weapon is on board the ship, including an enormous canon that represents the peak of American military innovation.

Also on board is Ned Land, a 40-year-old, six-foot-tall Canadian man known as "the prince of harpooners." He is cold and curt, with a "sinister" air about him. Yet Ned develops some affection for Arronax due to the fact that Arronax is French and Ned is from Quebec. He tells Arronax all about his adventures at sea. Ned does not believe that the monster exists. When Arronax asks him why, Ned explains that, as a professional whaler, he is not prone to the same fantasies as the general public regarding the existence of supernatural creatures of the sea. He has seen many whales in his time, but none could damage the steel bottom of a ship like the *Scotia*.

Arronax explains that, due to the enormous pressure present in the deep sea, creatures who live there must possess extraordinary power. He points out that if Ned were to find himself in the deep sea, he would be flattened in seconds. Ned is shocked, and admits that he is "almost" persuaded by Arronax's reasoning.

For both Farragut and Arronax, finding the monster is more than just a job. Indeed, all the characters depicted in the novel have internalized their vocation as their most important purpose in life and the very core of their being.



Ned's comment about the difference between his perspective and that of the general public is crucial. It confirms the sense that to the public, the monster is not a real thing but a figment upon which their fantasies and fears are projected. As someone who spends most of his time among real "monsters" of the ocean, Ned has little need or patience for imaginative speculation.



Ned and Arronax are very different, but both are clearly open to learning from the other and exchanging knowledge with each other. This symbiotic relationship emphasizes the importance of dialogue and knowing one's intellectual limits.



PART 1, CHAPTER 5: THE GREAT ADVENTURE

On June 30, the *Abraham Lincoln* makes contact with some American whalers, one of whom—the captain of a ship called the *Monroe*—asks Ned to help the crew of his ship hunt a whale. Ned ends up killing not one but two whales, and this creates confidence that if the *Abraham Lincoln* ever finds the monster, it has no hope of surviving a clash with Ned. The ship continues sailing south around Latin America, and on July 6 it reaches Cape Horn before moving north around the other side of the continent, now in the Pacific Ocean.

Motivated by the \$2,000 prize, the sailors keep a close eye on the water, as does Arronax, even though he is not particularly interested in the money. Every time someone thinks they might see something, a great rush of excitement washes over the ship, only to subside into disappointment shortly after. By the end of July, the ship crosses the equator, and at this point the ship heads west, deeper into the Pacific. The ship spends three months there, scouring every inch of the ocean, and over time those on board become despondent. Eventually, Farragut announces that if the monster is still not found after three days, they will have to abandon the mission.

On the final night of the expedition, Arronax and Conseil stand looking out at the water, and Arronax laments that the whole effort was “a silly business after all.” Conseil agrees, pointing out that they’ve wasted a great deal of time by not heading immediately to France. However, just at that moment Ned Land shouts that the object of their search is in sight.

The mission gets off to a successful start, but because the crew of the Abraham Lincoln still has no idea what they are facing, it is hard to say for sure whether Ned’s skills as a harpooner will be enough when (or if) they finally encounter the monster.



The fact that Arronax is completely unmotivated by money serves as yet another reminder that being a scientist isn’t just a job to him, but is rather the very essence of who he is. The problem with this, of course, is that the disappointment may be too much to bear if the mission is unsuccessful.



This passage underscores the importance of remaining hopeful despite all odds. Whereas Arronax is often preoccupied with rationality and the scientific likelihood of different phenomena, moments like this demonstrate that the natural world is not always predictable or analyzable.



PART 1, CHAPTER 6: FULL STEAM AHEAD

On hearing Ned’s cry, everyone on board the ship rushes to look. Just ahead of the ship, the monster glows with an extraordinary light. Someone exclaims, “It’s nothing but a vast collection of phosphoric particles,” but Arronax disputes this. Arronax points out that the creature is moving toward the ship, and Farragut immediately orders that they reverse. After initially seeming to retreat, the monster pursues them at frightening speed.

The fact that the monster is its own source of light heightens its mystery. It recalls the frightening-looking angler fish of the deep sea, which have a light attached to a kind of antenna used to attract prey.



Farragut approaches Arronax and says that their only choice is to retreat, as they have no idea what the creature is or what it's capable of. Farragut speculates that it is an **electric** "gigantic narwhal." At midnight, the narwhal seems to disappear, but less than an hour later makes an extremely loud whistling sound. The crew stays awake all night, nervously anticipating a clash with the monster. At dawn, the light is obscured by a thick fog. Around eight a.m., Ned exclaims that he sees the animal, and everyone on board rushes to get a proper look. Arronax guesses that it is a mammal about 250 feet long.

Farragut signals for the ship to head straight toward the monster. The creature turns away, and the ship increases its speed to 18.5 knots. Yet despite going full steam ahead, the *Abraham Lincoln* never manages to get very close to the creature. To the frustration of all those aboard, the creature is much faster than the ship. A gunner manages to fire one of the ship's guns at the monster, but it has little effect, sliding right off the monster's skin into the water. Arronax hopes that the monster will tire itself out, but it doesn't.

Night falls, and Arronax laments that the mission is doomed. However, to his surprise, an opportunity arises: the monster appears to fall asleep, and the ship is able to get close to it. Ned harpoons the monster, and immediately massive jets of water erupt from its body, sending those on the *Abraham Lincoln*—including Arronax—overboard into the sea.

PART 1, CHAPTER 7: AN UNKNOWN SPECIES OF WHALE

In the water, Arronax sees the *Abraham Lincoln* and attempts to swim toward it, shouting for help as he does so. He starts to drown, but then finds himself being pulled up by Conseil, who explains that when he saw Arronax disappear into the water, he swam in after him. Conseil adds that the monster "chewed to bits" the screw and rudder of the *Abraham Lincoln*. Conseil notices that Arronax's clothes are making it difficult for him to swim, so—after getting permission—cuts them off. Conseil believes that their only hope of survival is waiting for one of the *Abraham Lincoln*'s boats to rescue them, so they hold onto each other and take turns keeping themselves afloat.

Despite the dire circumstances, Arronax manages not to lose hope. However, after several hours he is paralyzed by a cramp. For a brief period Conseil tries to keep both of them afloat, but Arronax tells him to swim off and save himself. Conseil says he would rather drown than leave Arronax. Arronax can see the ship about five miles away; no boats are in sight. He starts to cry. Conseil weakly shouts for help, and they hear a faint response. They try to see who it is, but before long both men lose consciousness.

The passages describing the Abraham Lincoln's initial contact with the narwhal introduce the importance of electricity in the novel. In the 19th century, electricity was still somewhat novel and certainly not as ubiquitous as it is today. The fact that a monster deep in the ocean could be electric would be a thrilling thought to readers at the time.



The crew of the Abraham Lincoln are both intrigued and frightened by the monster. Indeed, their pursuit of the mysterious creature is an example of how curiosity and fear often coexist and create conflict with each other.



Ned's rather blunt and brutal approach to the monster—a significant contrast to Arronax's cautious, rational method of scientific observation—has disastrous results in this passage.



Arronax and Conseil's potential drowning is an immediate reminder of the dangers of the ocean. Indeed, it could be read as an affront to the hubris of those aboard the Abraham Lincoln, who were attempting to assert their control and supremacy over the ocean yet who were starkly reminded that the water (and its mysterious inhabitants) will always have more power than them.



Conseil's total devotion to Arronax could be read as moving, yet it could also be seen as unrealistic and even sinister. The fact that Conseil would so gladly sacrifice his own life suggests that he has internalized the unequal dynamic between master and servant as necessary and right, even to his own detriment.



When Arronax wakes up, he is surprised to see Conseil and Ned standing before him. Ned explains that he was able to avoid drowning because he managed to get on top of the “narwhal,” which it turns out is made of iron. Arronax immediately looks up and investigates the ground beneath him. He realizes that what they thought was the monster is actually a man-made object—a “submersible boat.” At this point a loud sound emerges from the boat, and they begin to move. Arronax realizes that it is urgent that they communicate with whoever is inside the object. Soon after, a hatch opens, and a single man emerges and lets out a cry of shock. He is joined by seven others, all wearing masks, who take Arronax, Ned, and Conseil down into the ship.

This is the first and most important plot twist of the novel. While the reader will have been preparing to encounter a story about a mysterious sea creature, it turns out that the novel actually revolves around a manmade object. This is one of the moments when the narrative thus shifts away from fantasy and toward an early version of science fiction.



PART 1, CHAPTER 8: OUR NEW QUARTERS

Arronax is terrified. He is carried down a ladder along with Ned and Conseil. Fuming, Ned exclaims that the men who took them down there are barbaric. The prison cell into which the men are placed is brightly lit with the same “phosphorescence” as they saw when they first encountered the monster. The door opens, and two men enter. One is short and muscular, while the other is tall, the “finest specimen” of man Arronax has ever seemed. His eyes are wide-set, which makes his gaze far wider and deeper than that of the average person. The men speak to each other in a language Arronax doesn’t recognize.

This highly sinister turn of events somewhat resembles a scene of alien abduction—expect that instead of being beamed up into space, Arronax is on a vessel at sea. The fact that Arronax doesn’t recognize the language the men are speaking further emphasizes the idea that they are in some sense (either literal or metaphorical) alien to him.



Arronax introduces himself, Conseil, and Ned in French. When the two strangers don’t react, Arronax asks Ned to explain their story in English, but the men do not seem to understand this, either. Conseil then tries in German, but this is also a failure. After Arronax tries Latin, the men leave. Ned is furious, but Arronax urges him to remain calm. A servant of some kind enters and gives the men clothes made of mysterious fabric and serving them a meal. Each utensil is engraved with the phrase *Mobilis in Mobili* followed by the letter “N.” Arronax believes that N is the initial of the mysterious boat’s captain. The three men eat with enthusiasm, then immediately feel exhausted. Arronax’s anxieties about their situation subside into peaceful sleep.

The phrase Mobilis in Mobili seems to be the motto of whomever is captaining the submarine. It is Latin, and loosely means “moving amidst mobility.” This is an important phrase in light of the novel’s exploration of freedom vs. constraint. “Mobilis in Mobili” evokes free movement and the absence of constraint, but also a lack of agency in the sense of moving according to an existing current. This mirrors the state of Arronax, Conseil, and Ned: moving freely through the sea on a submarine, yet confined to the ship as prisoners.



PART 1, CHAPTER 9: NED LAND ATTACKS

When Arronax wakes up, he finds Ned and Conseil still asleep. He is disheartened to see that they all remain inside the prison cell, although he notices that their dinner dishes have been cleared away. He panics about the oxygen levels in the cell, which must be diminishing. To his relief, he manages to find a pipe that leads to a ventilator. His investigation of the room is stopped by Ned and Conseil waking up. Ned asks if it's dinnertime, and Arronax replies that he believes it is morning, and that they "have slept clear round the clock." Painfully hungry, the men await their next meal impatiently. They shout, but nobody answers. When, after two hours, the door finally opens, Ned attacks the person who comes inside. Arronax is shocked to hear the stranger addressing him politely in French.

The contrast between Arronax's panic about the lack of oxygen—clearly triggered by being both inside a mysterious vessel and inside a prison cell within that vessel—is a distinct contrast to the sense of freedom illustrated by Mobilis in Mobili. Whereas the submarine itself may enable the commander and crew to freely roam the ocean, the vessel also effectively functions as a prison for the panicked Arronax, Ned, and Conseil.



PART 1, CHAPTER 10: THE MAN OF THE SEAS

The man speaking to them is the submarine's commander, the tall man from earlier. He explains that he speaks French, English, German and Latin, but wanted to "reflect" before he spoke with the captives. Arronax is shocked by the total absence of any foreign accent in the commander's speech. The commander laments that the *Abraham Lincoln* attacked his vessel, calling the actions of the ship "evil." Arronax responds by explaining that people across the globe believe this vessel to be "some powerful sea monster of which it was necessary to rid the ocean at any cost." The commander asserts that he has the right to treat the three men as prisoners of war, or abandon them to the water.

It is difficult to tell whether the commander is a hero or villain. Indeed, as the novel ends up showing overall, he is not quite either. His capture of Arronax, Conseil, and Ned may seem like a brutal act of aggression, but—as he points out—it is actually justifiable if they are considered prisoners of war. Perhaps he is simply acting in self-defense.



When Arronax comments that such actions would be "savage," the commander angrily replies that he has legitimate reasons for removing himself from society and its "stupid laws." Stunned, Arronax thinks about how the commander has to answer to no one except himself and God. Arronax feels frightened and fascinated at the same time. The commander says that he will allow the men to stay aboard the vessel, and that they can be free as long as they agree to one thing: there will be times when he tells them to stay in their cabins, and they must obey. Arronax agrees, but points out that they aren't really "free" if they're confined to the vessel. However, the commander replies that Arronax must simply accept this.

Rules are obviously important to the commander, yet he appears to have a contradictory relationship to them. On one hand, he has exiled himself from society in order to escape what he calls its "stupid laws." Yet almost in the same breath, he immediately imposes a rule on his captives. It seems as if the commander considers other people's rules "stupid," but not his own.



The commander says that Arronax, Conseil, and Ned must give up their connections to the outside world. He reminds them that this is an act of mercy, as they are prisoners of war. He explains that Arronax's book about the sea is one of his favorites, but adds that there are mysteries in the sea that Arronax doesn't know about. He promises that Arronax is going to witness a "fairyland of marvels." Finally, he introduces himself as Captain Nemo. Arronax follows Nemo into a dining room, which is brilliantly lit. A lavish breakfast is laid out on the table.

Arronax doesn't recognize many of the dishes, though he senses that they come from the sea. Nemo assures him they are "wholesome and nourishing." He explains that the vessel's chef is an expert at making food from the ocean appear to be dairy or meat. While they eat, Nemo explains that he loves the sea because there, one is immersed in the beauty and harmony of creation. There is peace and freedom to be found there that does not exist on land. He notes that the vessel they are on is named the *Nautilus*.

PART 1, CHAPTER 11: THE NAUTILUS

Captain Nemo leads Arronax into a library. Nemo boasts of the profound tranquility that can be found in there, adding that it contains a total of 12,000 volumes. He encourages Arronax to look through them. Arronax notices that, although a wide range of subjects are covered, political economy is a notable absence. Nemo offers Arronax an exceptionally delicious cigar, explaining it is made of a nicotine-rich type of seaweed. They then enter a "museum" filled with an extraordinary selection of artworks. Famous artists from across history are all represented. Nemo explains that while still lived on land, he was an art collector; now, these pieces are "souvenirs of a world which is dead to [him]." He also has a collection of musical scores by significant composers.

Arronax is then astonished by a collection of animal and plant specimens from the sea, including a gigantic case of pearls. Arronax imagines that Nemo must have paid huge amounts of money for the collection, but Nemo says that he acquired them himself. Nemo takes Arronax to the room where he'll be staying, explaining that it adjoins Nemo's own. Looking at Nemo's room, Arronax notices that it is austere and minimal.

Captain Nemo has asserted himself as a kind of total authority by capturing the three men and forcing them to abide by his rules, yet at the same time, he appears to want the men to want to be aboard the ship. Again, this makes it difficult to tell whether he is a hero or a villain.



Nemo's sincere love of the ocean makes him a sympathetic character, even if he is also an eccentric (and somewhat sinister) one. His attitude that life in the ocean is better than on land does not seem totally unfounded, yet it almost appears as if he has created an artificial environment in order to justify this existing belief.



Again, Nemo's library and museum resemble the capsules of human culture that are sent to aliens in science fiction novels (and in reality—in 1977 the Voyager Spacecraft was launched, carrying two phonograph records filled with sounds and images of human culture). Of course, in this case Nemo does not appear to want to show any aliens these glimpses of human life, but rather hopes to preserve them for himself only.



Nemo is evidently a rich man, yet chooses a simple and austere setup for himself. It seems as if his distrust of human society and its "stupid laws" extends to a rejection of material consumption.



PART 1, CHAPTER 12: THE SOUL OF THE NAUTILUS

Nemo takes Arronax into the submarine's control room. Arronax recognizes some of the instruments in there, but many of them he does not. Nemo offers to explain the "soul of the *Nautilus*," and Arronax listens eagerly. He explains that the ship runs on a special kind of **electricity** derived from a saltwater formula. The machines that pump oxygen into the vessel are powered by electricity, as is a clock that Nemo points out. There is a small but powerful sailboat on board the submarine. Nemo and Arronax walk back through the ship, past Conseil and Ned, who are eating ravenously. In the kitchen, Arronax sees that all the food is made with electricity, rather than gas.

In the engine room, Arronax views the machine that produces electricity. He comments that he now understands how the ship manages to move at its extraordinary speed, but still doesn't understand the dexterity of its movement, or how it manages to survive the intense pressure of the deep sea. Nemo says he is happy to explain everything, seeing as Arronax will never leave the *Nautilus* again.

In the late 1860s when the story takes place, the fact that the Nautilus is powered by electricity would seem much more exciting and impressive than it does today (although other elements of the vessel are certainly impressive even from a contemporary perspective). Verne's breathless enthusiasm about electricity at times becomes rather comical for modern readers, such as when Arronax is surprised by the electric oven in this passage.



This passage begins as a rapturous and happy moment of scientific curiosity, and ends on a deeply sinister note. The fact that Nemo mentions that Arronax will never leave the Nautilus so casually somehow makes this statement even more ominous than it would otherwise be—it's clear that Nemo is fully committed to the notion that he is in control and that Arronax and his companions are prisoners for life on the Nautilus.



PART 1, CHAPTER 13: CAPTAIN NEMO EXPLAINS

Nemo and Arronax sit in the saloon, smoking seaweed cigars. Nemo explains that the *Nautilus* is 6,032 feet long and weighs 1,500 tons. The exterior of the ship is made of steel. Nemo explains that the ship is able to travel far into the depths of the deep sea by allowing precise levels of water inside designated reservoirs. The engine, powered by **electricity**, has "almost infinite" power. Nemo explains that the collision between the *Nautilus* and the *Scotia* happened by accident, and is relieved to hear that no one was killed as a result. Meanwhile, Nemo only attacked the *Abraham Lincoln* as an act of defense after the latter ship attacked first.

Nemo explains that the *Nautilus* is the perfect ship both due to its **electrical** power and the fact that, travelling below the surface of the water, it is unimpeded by things like storms. As "captain, builder, and engineer" of the vessel, Nemo has utmost faith in it. Before committing to his life in the sea, Nemo studied engineering in London, Paris, and New York. He managed to build the *Nautilus* without anyone noticing by sourcing its parts from different parts of the world. Arronax asks if Nemo is rich, and Nemo replies that he is so rich that he could personally "pay the national debt of France" if he wanted.

The phrase "almost infinite" is key, as it reveals how electricity is posited as being an almost magical force in this 19th-century context. Of course, to many living at the time Verne wrote the novel, electricity may indeed have appeared this way. In this sense, the novel captures how technology can seem larger-than-life and thus be interpreted in mythic terms.



This passage establishes a parallel between the "almost infinite" power of electricity and the similarly infinite-seeming power of Nemo himself. In both cases, the source of power is somewhat obscured. Electricity seems like a magical force produced out of nowhere and capable of anything; similarly, Nemo is portrayed as having supernatural levels of wealth and intelligence, but there is no explanation of how this came to be the case.



PART 1, CHAPTER 14: THE BLACK RIVER

Nemo announces that it is 11:45 a.m., and they will now travel up to the surface of the ocean. Once up there, Arronax climbs onto a platform and looks out over the horizon, before going back down into the saloon. Nemo invites Arronax to immerse himself in his scholarly work, saying he will leave him at peace. Finally alone, Arronax reflects on the extraordinary situation in which he has found himself. Just like on land, the sea has “rivers”; the river along which the *Nautilus* travels crosses the Pacific Ocean and is called the Black River.

Arronax meets with Conseil and Ned inside the ship’s museum. Ned is confused, and Arronax slowly provides information about the vessel, suggesting that they be “patient” and remain optimistic. Suddenly, everything goes dark. Then beams of light appear, illuminating the sea outside. The men gaze out of the vessel’s windows at the “unexplored abyss” around them. They are all entranced by the strange creatures swimming around; working together, they give them names and categories. At five p.m., Ned and Conseil go to their cabin, and Arronax goes to his. He eats a luxurious dinner, and spends the evening “happily, reading, writing, and dreaming.”

PART 1, CHAPTER 15: A NOTE OF INVITATION

On the next day, November 9, Arronax wakes after a long and peaceful sleep. He goes to the saloon but cannot find Nemo, and thus spends time looking at the marine plants gathered in the glass cases. On the following day, Nemo is once again absent. Arronax, Ned, and Conseil are confused; the situation feels surreal. On November 11, the *Nautilus* resurfaces in order to stock up on oxygen. Arronax is on the vessel’s deck when an officer comes up to him, says a phrase that Arronax doesn’t understand, and walks away.

Five days pass; each morning Arronax goes up to the deck, where the same officer says the same thing. Nemo is still missing. On November 16, Arronax finds a letter in his cabin. The letter is from Captain Nemo; it is an invitation to a “hunting party” on the island of Crespo. Ned enthusiastically exclaims that they should accept the invitation, but adds that once he gets back on dry land he will not be going back to the *Nautilus*. Consulting a star chart, Arronax establishes that their destination is a small, deserted island discovered by Captain Crespo in 1801.

Nemo obviously respects Arronax, and it appears that this respect is based on the two men’s shared love and appreciation of the ocean. Nemo is enthusiastic about supporting Arronax’s work seemingly because it is devoted to the part of existence that Nemo cares about the most: undersea life.



As a naturalist, Arronax’s job involves naming and categorizing phenomena from the natural world. In the 19th century this was considered a highly important task—the sorting of nature into distinct (man-made) categories was one of the main pursuits of scientific research. In subsequent eras, there has been more criticism of the Western scientific tendency to impose categories onto phenomena which they might not actually fit.



Nemo claimed that he was happy to explain everything about how the vessel worked to Arronax, but it also seems as if he is deliberately keeping much of the vessel’s operations mysterious. Indeed, maintaining this level of obscurity helps Nemo retain power over the captives.



Nemo appears to treat the ocean as a kind of playground where he and the members of his crew are the only humans around. Although on one level this could be seen as a marker of ultimate freedom, it is also a profoundly isolated mode of existence. The novel raises the question, then, as to whether freedom is worth it when bought at such a price.



The next day, Arronax wakes to find the vessel still. Nemo is waiting for him in the saloon, and the two men eat breakfast together. After eating a little, Nemo reflects that it is possible for a man to survive underwater so long as he has a steady supply of oxygen; however, this is a somewhat confined existence, as the man remains totally tethered to his oxygen supply, without which he cannot survive. Nemo hopes to be freed by something called the Rouquayrol apparatus, which was invented by two Frenchmen. It is an iron tank that a person wears on their back containing a store of air that is accessed through rubber breathing tubes.

In addition to experimenting with the Rouquayrol apparatus, Nemo has also been using the Ruhmkorff burner, a light that he attaches to his waist that works as a kind of special deep-sea lantern, allowing him to swim in the deep sea and actually see where he's going. Arronax is impressed, but says he has one final question, regarding the gun that he will carry during the hunting trip. Nemo describes a special gun with **electrified** bullets invented by an Austrian, which can kill any animal, no matter how large. Satisfied, Arronax says that he is now ready and eager to join the expedition.

For Nemo, the only drawbacks of a totally underwater existence are practical. If he can find a way to breathe underwater, then he evidently would prefer never to come up to the surface at all. In a sense, Nemo's rejection of human society means that he doesn't even want to be human, but would rather be a sea creature and thus be totally in harmony with the water.



Nemo combines a commitment to science and nature in an unusual and novel manner. Often people presume that embracing scientific technology puts a person at odds with the natural world. Yet as Nemo demonstrates, the two can actually operate together in a synthesized manner—by wearing the Rouquayrol apparatus and Ruhmkorff burner, Nemo is effectively imbued with superhuman abilities and becomes one with the natural world around him. Still, it's clear from Nemo's desire to hunt and collect specimens that he is driven to exert control over other creatures rather than to merely observe and coexist with them.



PART 1, CHAPTER 16: ON THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA

Arronax explains to Ned—who balks at the prospect of wearing the suits Nemo has laid out for them—that “the forests of the island of Crespo” are actually deep in the ocean. The outfits are made from rubber, and almost resemble suits of armor. After overcoming his initial hesitation, Ned joins Arronax and Conseil in putting on his suit. To Arronax's embarrassment, he struggles to walk inside the outfit. Arronax admits that it is hard to describe the wonder and freedom that accompanied swimming through the ocean in Nemo's special gear.

Arronax wishes he could communicate with Conseil about the wonders before them, but because their submersion in the water prevents this, he talks to himself instead. Nemo leads the way, indicating where the men should go. After about an hour and a half away from the *Nautilus*, the men begin journeying down a slope, going ever deeper into the ocean. They keep walking until an “obscure mass” appears in the distance. Arronax realizes that this is the forest of Crespo.

Again, there is a contrast between the clunky, rather comical-seeming outfits that Nemo gives the men to wear and the feeling of freedom that accompanies swimming in them. This reiterates the idea that human technologies—as clumsy and imperfect as they can be—can facilitate beautiful and harmonious interactions with nature.



The inability of Arronax and the others to communicate while wearing their suits can be read as a metaphor for the costs and benefits of the self-imposed exile Nemo has chosen. The men are each undergoing a profound, beautiful experience exploring the ocean floor. Yet if they are unable to share the experience with others, is it worth it?



PART 1, CHAPTER 17: A SUBMARINE FOREST

Approaching the forest, Arronax notices that all of the plants and branches are pointing directly up toward the surface of the ocean. The forest consists of a spectacular collection of plants; in between these, fish swim like birds flying through treetops. After a substantial period of exploration, Nemo indicates for the group to stop. Arronax suddenly feels very tired, and lets himself drift off into sleep. He is not sure how long he is unconscious. When he wakes up, he sees that Nemo is already awake, and that there is an enormous sea spider nearby. Ned kills the spider, but Arronax remains nervous, as he knows that there are other frightening creatures lurking down there.

The men walk for four hours, before coming across a huge pile of “blocks,” which Arronax soon realizes is the edge of the island. He is stunned by the realization that he is standing in front of a land mass, and is tempted to try and climb it even though he knows this will prove impossible. The men turn around, but instead of going back the way they came, they instead begin swiftly moving up toward the surface of the sea. At one point, Arronax watches Nemo take out his gun, and soon after sees that he’s shot a majestic sea otter, which Arronax realizes must have a “very valuable pelt.”

The group of men walk along the sand, and at one point Nemo shoots a bird flying just above the surface of the water. As they head back toward the *Nautilus*, they find themselves surrounded by two fearsome, man-eating sharks. In this moment, Arronax does not think of himself as a scientist—only a potential victim. He is terrified, but fortunately the sharks cannot see well and thus swim past without noticing the men. Around half an hour later, the men safely arrive back at the *Nautilus*.

Part of Nemo’s harmonious existence with nature involves embracing the dangers of the natural world. While Nemo takes certain steps to keep himself (and his men) safe, he also exposes himself to dangers that are an inevitable part of exploring nature—it seems that he is ultimately more concerned with gaining knowledge than with preserving his own wellbeing.



Arronax’s strong emotional reaction to seeing land conveys the particular tragedy of his situation. Removed from almost everything he knows and loves, Arronax is forced to live in a strange limbo wherein he knows he is proximate to the life he once had, but is totally unable to access it. This is powerfully conveyed by the image of him standing at the bottom of the land mass, unable to climb it but wishing he could do so.



The moment in which the seemingly terrifying sharks peacefully swim past the men is significant. It highlights the extent to which the men have successfully assimilated into the ocean, such that the sharks don’t notice them or recognize them as out of place. They are now part of the harmony of creation that Nemo described in his conversation with Arronax.



PART 1, CHAPTER 18: FOUR THOUSAND LEAGUES UNDER THE PACIFIC

The next morning, November 18, Arronax notices that Nemo seems distracted. The sailors aboard the *Nautilus* are bringing in nets that had been left out overnight. Arronax notices that they come from a variety of different European countries. They haul in a spectacular array of fish. The light of the *Nautilus* attracts fish to the nets, making them easy to catch. Suddenly, Nemo comments on the nature of the ocean, which he frames as a kind of semi-divine organism. He fantasizes about a whole world of cities and communes deep in the sea.

One of the questions the novel raises is whether Nemo is justified in his beliefs about the ocean, or whether he is projecting his idea of an ideal world onto it. After all, there is nothing to say that cities and communes underwater would be any less brutal and terrible than life on land. Indeed, it seems that what is appealing to Nemo about the ocean is that no humans live there.



Over the following days, the *Nautilus* continues moving southeast past the tropic of Cancer and the Sandwich Islands, where Captain Cook died. On December 9 or 10 the *Nautilus* is briefly slowed down due to being caught in an enormous shoal of mollusks, many of which are caught in the vessel's nets. Shortly after, they pass a shipwreck. Arronax is horrified and saddened by the sight of it. As they pass it, Arronax reads its name: 'Florida,' *Sunderland*.

The novel has a somewhat contradictory relation to the legacy of colonial exploration. While Nemo claims to be vehemently opposed to colonial brutality and aligns himself with oppressed peoples, the book frequently mentions the names of colonizers, usually in a rather reverent manner.



PART 1, CHAPTER 19: THE ISLAND OF VANIKORO

The 'Florida,' *Sunderland* shipwreck is one of many that the *Nautilus* encounters on its journey. On December 11 the vessel comes close to the Paumotu Islands. Arronax shares his theory that in the future, a fifth continent will connect New Zealand to the French territory of New Caledonia in the Pacific Ocean. Nemo replies, "The earth does not need new continents, it needs new men." Arronax observes walls of polypi, reflecting on the different scientific theories about how these walls are formed.

Captain Nemo's anti-humanism could be read as rather advanced, a prefiguring of strains of thought that are becoming increasingly common in reaction to the modern issue of climate change. Like certain ecological thinkers and activists today, Nemo seems to believe that the earth would be better off without humanity (or at least this destructive version of humanity).



On Christmas Day the *Nautilus* reaches the New Hebrides, which were "discovered" by Pedro Fernández de Queirós. Ned seems sad about there being no Christmas celebration on the ship. Arronax thinks it would be silly to mention this to Nemo, whom he hasn't seen in a week. However, shortly after, Nemo comes into the saloon and announces that they have reached Vanikoro, a cluster of islands that are part of the Solomon Islands. Excited, Arronax runs up to the viewing platform. Arronax sees a group of "naked savages" on the island, who look shocked at the sight of the *Nautilus*.

The descriptions of indigenous people in the novel are, by and large, aligned with the highly offensive, inaccurate, and propagandistic ideas common at the time the novel was written. The word "savages" indicates the extent to which indigenous people were dehumanized by the accounts of colonizers.



Nemo asks Arronax to tell the story of La Pérouse, and Arronax proceeds to do so. La Pérouse was an esteemed French commander who drove a ship into Vanikoro, an area notorious for shipwrecks. The ship disappeared and La Pérouse's fate was unknown, although he was presumed to be dead. Different people tried to find the wreck, without success. They questioned the indigenous people of the island, who claimed to have no knowledge of what happened to the ship. On further questioning, the indigenous people eventually revealed that, after being washed up on the island, La Pérouse and his men built a second boat in an attempt to sail off the island but disappeared again. Yet the details remained mysterious.

This is yet another example of the many mysteries that define life at sea. Because the ocean is so vast, unexplored, and full of mystery, it is a site onto which people project endless projections, speculations, fears, and fantasies. There is something both fascinating and terrifying about the ways in which the water swallows up stories and knowledge, a reminder of human frailty in comparison to the power of the ocean.



Arronax says that he himself believes that no one knows what really happened to La Pérouse. Nemo then proceeds to tell the full version of the story, which involves some of the shipwrecked sailors “going native,” while others attempted to sail off and drowned. Nemo comments that drowning is a “fine fit end for a sailor,” reflecting, “A coral tomb makes a quiet grave.”

“Going native” referred to a process wherein colonizers assimilate into the local indigenous culture, often spurning the norms and customs of their own society as a result. The concept usually has strong racist undertones, as it implies that Western colonizers are civilized until integrating into an indigenous culture, wherein they become savages.



PART 1, CHAPTER 20: TORRES STRAITS

On the first day of 1868, Conseil greets Arronax by wishing him a happy New Year. Arronax wonders if the new year will end their “imprisonment.” By the next day, they are approaching the northeast coast of Australia. Arronax continues gathering samples of marine life. They cross a treacherous zone of rocks but, miraculously, the *Nautilus* “slide[s] by the rocks like magic.” However, shortly after a large jolt alerts Arronax that the *Nautilus* has struck something. Nemo remains calm, and tells Arronax that they have not experienced an “accident,” but rather just an “incident.” He explains that they must wait for the tide to push them off the ground back into the water.

Arronax’s experience aboard the “Nautilus” is contradictory. On one hand, the situation is bleak: he is a captive forced into exile who has been told that he will die in the “prison” of the vessel. At the same time, living on the submarine is also a kind of all-expenses-paid research trip with the best technology and opportunities on Earth freely available to him. In this sense, the novel takes an ambiguous stance toward freedom versus constraint—even if one is physically confined against their will, it seems that they can still retain freedom in other ways.



Ned announces that he doesn’t think the *Nautilus* will ever move again. Conseil suggests that they ask Nemo for permission to walk around on land for a little while, and to Arronax’s surprise, Nemo agrees. Arronax, Conseil, and Ned command a small boat. Ned is ecstatic at the prospect of eating real meat. He says that he will eat whatever he finds on the island, which is called Gilboa.

The area the Nautilus is now in is the Torres Strait, a strip of water dotted by islands between Australia and Papua New Guinea. Given Nemo’s distaste for human society and desire to keep Arronax and the others captive, it’s surprising that he’s willing to let them explore Gilboa, since the island may or may not be inhabited. Perhaps Nemo doesn’t consider a remote place such as this to be civilized in the same way that Western nations are, which could potentially suggest either prejudice or admiration for indigenous people on Nemo’s part.



PART 1, CHAPTER 21: ARCADIAN DAYS ON LAND

Arronax feels surprisingly emotional about walking around on dry land. While he observes the local fauna, Ned cracks open some coconuts, suggesting they take some with them back on the *Nautilus*. He fantasizes about bringing all kinds of goods back to the submarine, then jokes about understanding how cannibalism can be appealing. Meanwhile, the men are walking further and further into the island’s forest. To their delight, they eventually find some fruit and vegetables. They eat enthusiastically, then wonder how long they have been away from the submarine. Conseil comments, “How time flies when you’re on firm ground!”

To the three men, the island is a kind of paradise that provides relief from their existence trapped at sea. They evidently do not think about the fact that the land could be a group of people’s homes, and that they are brazenly trespassing. In this sense, this episode can be read as yet another metaphor for colonization.



At five p.m., the men return to the *Nautilus*. The submarine seems “deserted,” but Arronax has a long, peaceful sleep anyway. The next day, they remain moored in the same spot, and there are still no other signs of life on the vessel. The following day, Arronax, Conseil, and Ned decide to return to the island at dawn. They find some birds, which they are disappointed to see, on closer inspection, are parrots. However, Ned comments that in their desperate circumstances, parrots could make a delicious meal. Exploring further, Arronax is astonished to discover birds of paradise. By 11 a.m. they have covered a large distance of the island, but still not eaten anything. Eventually, Ned shoots and cooks some pigeon.

The men embark on another hunt, and before long Conseil lets out a shout of triumph. He has captured a bird alive, and discovered that it is drunk on nutmegs. It is a large emerald bird, the rarest and most spectacular species to be found in the Papuan islands. At two p.m., Ned manages to shoot a hog, and the men finally have the red meat they’ve been craving. Later, they come upon a herd of kangaroos, and successfully shoot these, too. At six p.m., they return to the shore, and prepare a delicious dinner with the day’s catch. They also drink liquor made from fermented coconut. Conseil and Ned half-jokingly suggest that they never go back to the *Nautilus*. Suddenly, a stone falls dramatically at their feet.

PART 1, CHAPTER 22: CAPTAIN NEMO’S THUNDERBOLT

The three men are all frozen with shock. Another stone flies at them, this time knocking the pigeon leg out of Conseil’s hand. Ned asks if “apes” are the culprit, and Arronax replies that it’s “savages,” which he claims is basically the same. They run to the boat; Ned refuses to leave their hunting winnings behind, but still manages to move with speed. They are chased by around 100 indigenous people, shouting and gesturing with anger. When they get back on board the *Nautilus*, they find Captain Nemo playing the piano organ in the drawing room. When Arronax tells Nemo what happened on the island, Nemo objects to Arronax’s framing of the indigenous people as “savages,” and also assures him that they wouldn’t have posed any serious threat.

Arronax and Ned embody two opposing modes of the appreciation of nature. On one hand, Arronax has the enthusiasm of a naturalist, someone keen to document and preserve the great variety of wildlife that exists on Earth. Ned, meanwhile, has a much more practical, survival-based approach to the natural world. At the same time, this approach is also a form of appreciation, since natural resources like hunted birds will provide Ned and the others with the sustenance they need.



Although on one level the men perhaps can hardly be blamed for being so enthusiastic about the prospect of eating red meat after their months without it, the brazen and greedy way in which they kill so many animals on the island seems destined to cause trouble—as the mysterious stone (likely thrown by a person) indicates is about to happen.



Again, the book’s representation of indigenous people is rather ambiguous, particularly in passages like this where both a highly dehumanizing and a more fair perspective are juxtaposed together. While the book arguably indicates that Nemo’s sympathy with oppressed people and opposition to exploitation are admirable, overall Nemo functions as a somewhat ridiculous character with strange and eccentric views. This perhaps puts his views in a less serious light.



Nemo appears to lose himself in piano-playing again, and Arronax leaves. The next morning, at six a.m., Arronax goes back to the platform on top of the *Nautilus*. As the light makes the island visible, he sees an enormous gathering of indigenous Papuans. Their ears are decorated with bones, and many are naked. Arronax notices that there are several women among them. The Papuans scrutinize the *Nautilus*, and keep repeating a word, *assai*, which Arronax realizes is an invitation to come onto the island. He declines. By 11 a.m. even more Papuans stand on the shore, although as far as Arronax can see they don't have any boats with them.

Without anything else to do, Arronax sets to work collecting specimens from the water, assisted by Conseil. He comes upon a shell so special that makes him scream in wonder. Distracted, he doesn't notice a Papuan man aiming a rock at the shell; the rock knocks the shell right out of Conseil's hand, smashing it. Conseil immediately picks up his gun and points at the Papuan man, but Arronax stops him, saying, "No shell is worth the life of a man." Arronax, concerned about what he perceives as the Papuans' increasing boldness, goes to find Nemo. He announces that the Papuans have surrounded the *Nautilus* in their canoes. Nonchalantly, Nemo presses an "electric button" that closes the hatches of the vessel, before assuring Arronax that he needn't worry anymore.

Arronax is about to leave, when Nemo requests that he stay to chat. The men discuss the French explorer Dumont d'Urville, who—after a spectacular career adventuring at sea—died in a railroad accident. After this conversation, Arronax goes to tell Conseil that according to Nemo, they don't have anything to fear from the Papuans. He suggests that they choose to trust the captain. Arronax sleeps restlessly, disturbed by the sound of the Papuans, which enters his dreams. In the morning he feels unsure of what to do with himself. He awaits the high tide that they are hoping will rescue the *Nautilus*, which is due to arrive in the afternoon.

Just in time, the vessel begins to rock, indicating that the tide is indeed moving it away. Nemo suggests that they open the hatches, even though the Papuans still surround the ship. When the hatches are opened, Arronax watches with horror as the Papuans clamor to enter the vessel. However, each one who does so leaps back in horror as soon as he reaches the staircase. Confused, Ned touches the staircase only to be thrown away. He screams that he has been hit by a "thunderbolt." Arronax realizes that that the staircase is **electrified**. The *Nautilus* continues on its journey.

The ambiguity of the Papuans' invitation—as well as Arronax's unequivocal response—is significant. It is unclear whether the Papuans' are attempting a peace offering or trying to lure Arronax back in order to further harass him. Either way, the act of invitation indicates that they want his entrance to the island to be on their terms. Yet Arronax does not respect them, and thus dismisses the invitation without much thought.



The phrase "electric button" might appear redundant to modern eyes, but in the 1860s it would have seemed futuristic and exciting. Some critics have marveled at the extent to which Verne was able to predict the arrival of technologies before they actually existed, but others argue that the prophetic element of his writing has been exaggerated, and that his depictions of technology are neither particularly prescient nor sophisticated.



Given what Nemo has already said about coral being the ideal tomb for a sailor, it seems that he believes the opposite is true of Dumont d'Urville. To Nemo, nothing could be worse than the life of a sailor ending on land, especially in an accident on the railroad, a symbol of modern human society.



The gruesome end to the interaction between the main characters and the Papuans recalls all the terrible ways in which colonizers deploy technology in order to torture, incarcerate, and kill colonized people. This passage makes it clear that technology is not neutral—it can be utilized for scientific purposes, but it can also be harnessed to harm other people.



PART 1, CHAPTER 23: CONFINEMENT

The *Nautilus* moves at incredible speed, sailing around Australia and heading for the Indian Ocean. During this journey, the submarine's **electricity** fails. While the vessel floats without power, Arronax suddenly finds that they are surrounded by spectacular sheets of light. Although he is initially confused, he eventually comes to realize that this light is coming from a mass of phosphorescent marine life. The submarine floats in the middle of these animals, creating an "enchanted" sight for those aboard.

The submarine continues onward, journeying "from one new marvel to another." They grow accustomed to life on the *Nautilus*, until one day an incident occurs that jerks them out of this state of acceptance. Captain Nemo spies something in his telescope that appears to greatly disturb him. They are in the middle of the ocean, hundreds of miles from land, and Arronax wonders what the captain could possibly have spotted. Overwhelmed by curiosity, Arronax retrieves his own telescope. However, Nemo then asks Arronax to obey the one condition he set before him when he was captured, and return to his cabin. Feeling like he has no choice, Arronax obeys. Once down there, he tells Ned and Conseil what happened.

The men are served breakfast, and they eat in silence. As soon as they are finished eating the light in their room goes out, and Ned and Conseil quickly fall asleep. Arronax is confused, but then is hit with a wave of exhaustion himself. He realizes that they have been drugged with "sleeping powder." He feels terrified, but cannot help but fall asleep.

The fact that there are actually phosphorescent animals in the ocean emphasizes the congruity between the electric Nautilus and the surrounding landscape. At the same time, it is significant that the submarine's own electricity needs to fail in order for the enchanting extent of the surrounding marine life to be revealed, perhaps suggesting that technology can sometimes impede one's appreciation of the natural world rather than enhance it.



The challenging reality of life aboard the Nautilus is that it only exists in two modes: the terrifying and the mundane. Most of Arronax's days on board the boat are repetitive and unmemorable, increasing the feeling of claustrophobia provoked by his situation. The fact that every now and then this monotony is interrupted by terror can hardly be seen as much of a relief.



Nemo continues to exercise a tyrannical level of control over his captives. In a sense, it is obvious why he does it—in the middle of the ocean, on the ship commandeered by him, there is absolutely no one to stop him.



PART 1, CHAPTER 24: THE REALM OF CORAL

The next morning, Arronax wakes up feeling fresh and alert. He sets off to explore the submarine, and doesn't find anything unusual. However, he also cannot find Captain Nemo. That afternoon, Arronax is sitting in the drawing room when Nemo enters, looking weary. He asks if Arronax is qualified as a medical doctor, and Arronax replies that he is. Nemo takes Arronax to see one of the sailors, who has a terrible wound on his head. Arronax tends to it, then asks Nemo how the sailor was wounded. Nemo dodges the question. Arronax gravely admits that the man will be dead within two hours, and that nothing can be done to prevent this.

In today's world, it would be somewhat unusual for a professor of natural history to also be a qualified medical doctor. However, in the 19th century there were fewer divisions among different scientific fields, and thus it would have been more normal for someone with Arronax's position to also be trained as a doctor.



On hearing Arronax's diagnosis, Nemo begins to cry. After a while, Nemo permits Arronax to leave. Arronax feels troubled for the rest of the day and night. The next morning, Nemo asks Arronax, Conseil, and Ned to join him on an excursion away from the submarine. They accept. Having donned diving suits, the men swim past a spectacular coral reef. Arronax briefly thinks about how much money he could make from selling this coral. At a certain point they stop in a glade, and Nemo begins digging a hole. Arronax suddenly realizes that this is to be the grave of the fallen sailor. After the hole is made, the man's body is placed within it, and the "funeral procession" returns to the *Nautilus*.

In the previous chapter, Nemo's decision to drug the three captives put him in a decidedly unsympathetic light, making him seem unforgivably tyrannical. Yet his profound grief over losing a member of his crew—combined with the surreal, moving funeral procession that takes place underwater—encourages the reader to reconsider their assessment of Nemo's character yet again.



PART 2, CHAPTER 1: THE INDIAN OCEAN

Arronax has developed a burning curiosity about the source of Nemo's resentment toward human civilization. Conseil has his own theory—that Nemo is a "misunderstood genius"—but Arronax remains bewildered by Nemo's rejection of human society. The *Nautilus* is currently in the Indian Ocean, moving at a depth of between 50-100 fathoms. Arronax reflects that if he had not been such an ardent lover of the sea he would have felt bored by his time down there, but thankfully, he doesn't. He is fascinated by the great array of marine life they pass on their journey. The light of the vessel attracts fish, though most swim away in fright shortly after.

Another question that the novel invites the reader to consider is whether Arronax behaves selfishly in not trying harder to free himself and the two other captives. As he points out here, the only reason why he can bear his state of imprisonment is because, strangely, it involves performing the pursuit that he loves most in the world. Yet the same is not true for Conseil and Ned, and Arronax arguably does not give enough consideration to this fact.



The *Nautilus* spends the day of January 25 on the surface of the water. Arronax passes most of the day on the platform, fantasizing about encountering another vessel. In the early evening, he and Conseil spy a shoal of argonauts (a type of mollusk). The next day, the vessel is surrounded by a large group of terrifying sharks. When they pass creatures like this, Ned is overcome with an irrepressible urge to harpoon them. However, he never gets a chance—the *Nautilus* always speeds away. When the *Nautilus* enters the Bay of Bengal, they see a large number of corpses floating along the water. The water itself is a milky color, which Arronax explains to Conseil is the result of a large number of small worms within it.

The horrifying sight of the human bodies in the Bay of Bengal becomes a reminder of the terrible brutality of humanity (and colonizers in particular). The ocean is, of course, not free from violence or death, but there is something obviously and profoundly unnatural about the bodies floating in the water here, unlike the deaths that occur as part of the natural world.



PART 2, CHAPTER 2: THE ISLAND OF CEYLON

Captain Nemo invites Arronax to the island of Ceylon, which is known for its pearl fisheries. Nemo suggests they also hunt sharks, a prospect that terrifies Arronax. After Nemo leaves, Conseil and Ned come in, saying that Nemo has mentioned the pearl-fishing expedition to them, as well. Nervously, Arronax asks if Nemo gave any further information, and they reply that he didn't. The men discuss pearls, and Arronax attempts to casually ask if Ned is afraid of sharks. Ned replies that as a harpooner, he hates sharks, but is not afraid of them. However, his words do not manage to assure Arronax.

The differing attitudes between Arronax and Ned toward the sharks suggest that, while Arronax may have the most expert knowledge about the natural world, deeply understanding the ocean is arguably something that cannot come from knowledge alone. Instead, it is based in interacting with the ocean in a direct, fearless manner the way Ned does as a harpooner.



PART 2, CHAPTER 3: A PEARL OF GREAT PRICE

The next morning, Arronax is awoken at four a.m. for the expedition. As they set off in the boat, none of the men speak. At six a.m., they arrive at the bay where the pearl fisheries are. Nemo, Arronax, Conseil, and Ned all don their special rubber suits, with the oxygen apparatus attached to the backs. With Nemo leading the way, the men swim past many beautifully-colored fish. By seven a.m., they reach the banks covered in pearl oysters. Soon after they begin gathering treasures to bring back with them, Nemo enters a “large grotto” via an arch that looks as if it were manmade. The rest of the men follow him.

In the grotto, the men approach a gigantic mollusk with a pearl the size of a coconut. Arronax reaches out to touch it, but Nemo bats his hand away. Arronax realizes that Nemo has been leaving it to grow, letting it get more and more valuable. Arronax guesses that its current value is already around \$2,500,000. They continue on their journey for around 10 minutes, before encountering an Indian fisherman diving for pearls. The man stays underwater as long as possible, then swims to the surface before diving back down again. He is concentrating too hard to notice the others watching him.

To Arronax’s horror, the pearl diver suddenly gestures with terror—a shark is circling directly overhead. Just as the shark is opening its jaws to attack the diver, Nemo moves toward it and it turns its attention toward himself. The shark lunges at Nemo, but he nimbly dodges it. Arronax is impressed with Nemo’s bravery. Nemo and the shark become locked in a vicious fight, and the shark’s blood spills out into the water. Nemo is also injured, but just as the shark is about to kill him, Ned kills it with his harpoon. Back on board the *Nautilus*, Nemo offers his sincere thanks to Ned. As the vessel moves away, it passes the dead body of the shark, and Arronax stares fearfully at its six rows of teeth.

Arronax reflects on what motivated Nemo to intervene so bravely in order to stop the shark from killing the diver. He eventually mentions it to Nemo, who replies that he wanted to defend the diver because, as an Indian, the diver is “a member of an oppressed race” which means that Nemo is “one” with him.

The captives’ adventures with Nemo again raise the question of whether it is possible to properly enjoy an experience—even an objectively wonderful one, like diving for pearls in a pearl fishery—while knowing that one will never be able to share this experience with family and friends (or indeed, escape the experience in the first place).



Nemo’s multimillion dollar pearl continues the exploration of the question as to whether experiences are worth having if they cannot be shared. It is certainly an extraordinary feat to have found and grown a pearl of this value, yet it remains unclear as to whether Nemo will even be able (or willing) to sell it given that he eschews modern society and luxury. Furthermore, what use is money to someone who lives underwater in exile?



The climactic end to the pearl-diving expedition reveals that all the characters—despite their profound differences—are willing to risk their lives for one another. In Ned’s case, this is somewhat surprising given how much he (justifiably) hates Nemo for holding him prisoner. Perhaps he has begun to develop something akin to Stockholm syndrome, in which a prisoner gradually develops a fondness for their captor. Yet it is also possible that Ned’s killing of the shark is simply the product of his instincts as a harpooner.



This is a brief but crucial moment in the book. Some interpret it as evidence that Nemo himself is Indian, or that he comes from another colonized population. Of course, it is also possible that Nemo is of European origin and just feels genuine empathy for the man, or that Nemo is “oppressed” in a way that’s separate from his race.



PART 2, CHAPTER 4: THE RED SEA

By January 29, the *Nautilus* has covered a distance of 16,220 miles, or 7,500 leagues. As they travel into the Persian Gulf, Arronax wonders where Nemo is leading them. He discusses this question with Ned, who remains miserable about their seemingly never-ending voyage. In the first few days of February, they journey across the Sea of Oman, at one point coming close to the city of Muscat. Arronax gazes at the mosques and houses along its skyline, fascinated. However, before long the *Nautilus* sinks back under the water. On February 7, the vessel enters the Straits of Bab-el-mandeb, which means “the gate of tears” in Arabic. They cross it in less than an hour, arriving in the Red Sea.

Arronax once again finds himself dazzled by the natural world lying outside the *Nautilus*'s windows. Nemo asks if Arronax is appreciating the journey through the Red Sea, and Arronax replies in the affirmative. The two men comment on how much better it is to travel on a submarine rather than a boat, particularly through water known to be especially rough and dangerous. Nemo reflects that it may take a hundred years before there is another submarine like the *Nautilus*, because technological progress can be slow. Arronax agrees, saying it's a shame that the *Nautilus* will remain a secret. They then discuss the origins of the Red Sea's name.

Arronax asks if, on his journeys, Nemo has ever encountered evidence of the Biblical story of Moses parting the Red Sea. Nemo says he hasn't, because the area where this event is supposed to have taken place is a desert, and thus the *Nautilus* has no way of going there. They discuss the Suez Canal, which is in the process of being constructed, and its historical antecedents. They toast to the canal's developer, the French statesman Ferdinand de Lesseps. Nemo says that while it is unfortunate that they won't see the canal, in another few days they will be in the Mediterranean. Arronax is shocked, and Nemo explains that they will be travelling through a secret subterranean channel connecting the Red Sea and the Mediterranean.

One of the more curious aspects of the novel is the extent to which it is merely descriptive. Much of the book is devoted to describing the route of the Nautilus or the wildlife Arronax encounters on the way. This is another way in which the novel was strongly influenced by science. Its descriptive technique is rather scientific in nature, even if what is being described is imagined—a good example of the fusing of science and fiction.



This passage encourages the reader to question the purpose of technology. Arronax and Nemo agree that the Nautilus is remarkable and that it is a shame that there isn't another vessel like it. At the same time, Nemo doesn't seem too troubled by the idea of keeping the technology he uses secret. To him, the point of technology does not seem to be that it can be replicated and shared by many—rather, he places importance on technology because it enables him to isolate himself from society, explore the undersea world he loves, and continue developing his personal knowledge base.



Nemo has developed a vast historical and geographic knowledge. Yet the same question brought up by the last passage is also worth asking here—what value is this knowledge if there is no one (or in this case, only one person) with whom to share it? It is hard to imagine Nemo being satisfied with accruing so much information and holding onto it by himself, yet at the same time, his hatred of humanity is so intense that maybe this is indeed better for him than engaging in conversation.



PART 2, CHAPTER 5: UNDER THE ISTHMUS

That evening, the *Nautilus* passes the Saudi Arabian port city of Jeddah, and Arronax gazes at its buildings. The next day, he is standing with Ned on the platform when Ned points out a “blurry mass” in the distance, which they soon realize is a “gigantic dugong.” Ned is dazzled, looking almost as if he wants to throw himself into the water with the animal. Nemo appears, and gives Ned permission to harpoon the dugong, but warns that he should be careful not to miss. Sailors appear with a harpoon; Ned, Conseil, and Arronax climb in a boat along with six oarsmen and a boatswain, but Nemo stays behind.

The boat approaches the enormous animal, stopping at a distance of about six yards. Ned aims, but—though the harpoons strikes the dugong—the animal is only wounded, not killed. Ned continues his attack, but the dugong repeatedly evades him. After an hour of these attempts, the dugong turns around and attacks the boat. However, Ned is then finally able to strike the animal’s heart, and within moments it is dead. When they bring the dugong’s body to the submarine, they find that it weighs 10,000 pounds. Later, the *Nautilus* pass what appears to be a lighthouse; Nemo explains that it is “the floating light of Suez,” before politely requesting that Arronax leave the deck of the vessel in anticipation of their journey through the Arabian Tunnel.

Arronax accompanies Nemo into the pilot’s cage, where Nemo soon takes the helm. They approach the tunnel entrance, which to Arronax resembles “the mouth of hell.” The submarine is immediately caught in the torrent and zooms through the water. Within 20 minutes, they arrive in the Mediterranean.

Again, Nemo appears invested in appeasing his captives and giving them opportunities to do what they want to do. Yet this might not necessarily come from an altruistic foundation. Perhaps Nemo is attempting to stifle any chance of rebellion among those aboard the ship by allowing them small windows of freedom.



This passage serves as one of the novel’s many reminders that life on the ocean is not all harmony and peace—it is also a terrifying and brutal place. Yet again, this brutality is portrayed in a distinctly different light than the injustices inflicted by humans onto one another. The novel indicates that there is something noble and even beautiful about being a harpooner, despite the inherent violence of the role.



This is one of the moments in which the novel combines mythic, fantastic imagery (“the mouth of hell”) with science fictional gestures, as the submarine racing through the tunnel resembles modern-day high-speed trains.



PART 2, CHAPTER 6: THE GRECIAN ARCHIPELAGO

The next day, February 12, Ned and Conseil are both stunned to hear that the *Nautilus* has arrived in the Mediterranean. Ned requests to have a conversation with Arronax, and without hesitation announces his desire to escape the submarine. Arronax does not want to “shackle the freedom of [his] companions,” but also has no desire to abandon the submarine, which has provided him the best possible opportunities for scientific research and writing—opportunities he knows he will never have again. Ned admits that in some ways he’s happy about the time they’ve spent on board the *Nautilus*, but balks at Arronax’s suggestion that they be patient and remain on the submarine for now.

Here the novel provides a reminder that freedom and constraint are complicated, often producing ambiguous feelings. In Ned’s case, he feels conflicted about his time on the Nautilus, since he, like Arronax, has enjoyed himself at least somewhat. At the same time, Ned is also totally adamant that—even if he has had some good experiences aboard the submarine—he wants to seek his freedom anyway.



Arronax continues that they can't trust that Nemo will ever let them go, despite his kind nature. This means that it is imperative that their first escape attempt be successful. He eventually concedes that Ned can keep an eye out for the right opportunity to escape, but warns him not to take one unless he is absolutely sure it will work. He adds that Nemo likely suspects that they will try to flee, particularly now that they are back in European waters. On February 14, Arronax learns that the *Nautilus* is heading to the Cretan island Candia, where the local inhabitants recently revolted against "despotic Turkish rule." Arronax doesn't know whether the revolt was successful, and doesn't believe he will get any answers from Nemo.

Standing in the saloon with Nemo, Arronax gazes out into the water. He takes note of a number of interesting animals and plants, before spotting a diver who is still alive. Panicking, he calls Nemo over, but Nemo explains that the diver is Nicholas Pesca, a man who spends his time swimming between Cretan islands. Without saying anything else, Nemo opens a chest, which Arronax is shocked to see is filled with gold ingots. Nemo writes something on it in modern Greek, then pushes a button which calls members of the ship's crew into the room. The men carry the chest out, and shortly after Nemo bids Arronax goodnight.

The next day, Arronax tells Conseil and Ned about what he saw the night before. They wonder aloud where Nemo could be sending this huge sum of money. In the evening, Arronax notices that it is unusually hot, and fears that there might be a fire on board the submarine. Nemo enters, and calmly mentions that they are "floating in a current of boiling water." Arronax is horrified, but Nemo explains that it is a product of the volcanic formation of the islands, which is an ongoing process. Looking outside, Arronax sees that the water is red. There is also a strong smell of sulphur. When Arronax expresses his distress to Nemo, Nemo casually gives the signal for the boat to turn away from the boiling spot, and toward the sea's surface for some fresh air.

Stories of colonization, oppression, and rebellion are scattered throughout the book, but it remains somewhat ambiguous what purpose they serve. Of course, Arronax and the other captives are themselves planning a rebellion against Nemo. Yet it is Nemo who positions himself as the character on the side of the oppressed. For 19th-century European writers like Verne, issues of colonialism and rebellion were everywhere—yet this didn't necessarily lead to clear-sighted positions on these matters.



This is the first indication that Nemo might still be in contact with people outside of the submarine, since it appears as though he is sending the gold to someone in Greece. In addition, it seems as if Nicholas Pesca is like Nemo: someone who shuns human society in order to spend as much time as possible in the ocean.



Again, part of the book's purpose appears to be an almost encyclopedic exploration of the ocean's myriad wonders. While to ordinary human eyes the ocean might seem like one vast and homogenous ecosystem, the book shows that there is an incredible amount of diversity within it. Not only are there different kinds of plant and animal life all over the ocean, but there are even different atmospheres—storms, undersea forests, and hot areas caused by volcanoes.



PART 2, CHAPTER 7: THE MEDITERRANEAN IN FORTY-EIGHT HOURS

The *Nautilus* crosses the Mediterranean quickly; Arronax gets the feeling that Nemo is keen to return to the “open ocean” as soon as possible. The submarine is moving so fast that all hope of escape has been crushed, and Ned is severely disappointed. They pass over a bank of sand, and Conseil comments that this reef is like a “real isthmus joining Europe to Africa.” Arronax mentions that active volcanoes are diminishing, and that the Earth itself is cooling, to the point that it will one day be a “cold corpse beyond the power of artificial reviving.” At this point, everything on the planet will die out and it will become devoid of life, like the moon. Arronax notes that this will happen in “some hundreds of thousands of years.”

On February 18, the *Nautilus* reaches the Straits of Gibraltar. It speeds along a counter-current, and Arronax very briefly catches a glimpse of the ruins of the temple of Hercules. Only moments later, however, the submarine emerges into the calm waters of the Atlantic.

PART 2, CHAPTER 8: VIGO BAY

In rapturous language, Arronax reflects on the majestic size and beauty of the Atlantic Ocean. After breathing in some fresh air up on deck, he and Conseil retire to their respective cabins. For the first time, Ned comes into Arronax’s cabin, looking despondent and not saying a word. Arronax expresses sympathy with Ned’s grim mood after their loss of opportunity for escape, but reminds him that attempting to leave would have been “suicide.” Suddenly, with intense seriousness, Ned says that he has made a plan to escape that night, when the submarine is only a few miles off the coast of Spain.

Ned explains that at nine p.m. that night, he and Conseil will sneak onto the submarine’s central staircase, while Arronax waits in the saloon. On their signal, he will join them on a small boat that has already been prepared. In response to this plan, Arronax feebly comments that the “sea is bad.” Ned fervently replies that they must take their chance to seize freedom at any cost, then leaves. Arronax is left miserably reflecting on the choice before him, which he perceives as being between his own personal freedom and the opportunity to complete his research aboard this “marvelous ship.” The hours until nine p.m. drag on slowly, and Arronax feels painfully tormented.

It is somewhat strange and haunting to read Arronax’s inaccurate prediction about the future of Earth. At the time the novel was written, large amounts of carbon dioxide were already being produced by fossil fuels, deforestation, and pollution, though no one knew that this was changing the Earth’s atmosphere. In a sense Arronax remains strangely prophetic—yet rather than life on Earth being threatened by cold, today it is threatened by heat.



Arronax’s surreal, fantastical tour through the oceans is also at times a tour of human history and culture. It seems that even though Nemo aims to separate himself from civilization, traces of humanity are everywhere.



Ned is described as both a simpler and bolder person than Arronax, and this is why he remains so determined to escape even when the odds don’t look good. Yet to some extent, Ned’s commitment to freedom at whatever cost ends up looking much more admirable than Arronax’s patient timidity.



*This passage explores the surprising intensity of Arronax’s passion for research. He cares so much about science that he is strongly considering giving up his own personal freedom, as well as everything he holds dear back on land, in order to continue his observation of the oceans. This is even more surprising considering it seems unlikely he would ever be able to share his research with the world if he does stay on the *Nautilus*.*



Looking around the submarine, Arronax finds himself in tears, horrified at the prospect of leaving somewhere where he has spent so much happy, productive time. At eight p.m., he returns to his room and dresses in warm clothes. He waits and listens, hoping to hear the sound of Ned being apprehended. He feels a movement that indicates the *Nautilus* has been parked on the ocean floor. Suddenly, Nemo enters the room, hoping to discuss the history of Spain. He recounts the story of the battle of Vigo Bay, although Arronax remains confused about why he believes this is of particular interest right now.

Nemo explains that they are currently in Vigo Bay, and that Arronax can choose to explore it if he wishes. Arronax looks out the panel windows of the *Nautilus* at the submarine's crew, which are currently engaged in clearing away chests upon chests of gold ingots, jewels, and other "precious booty." Suddenly, he realizes that Nemo has been collecting the spoils that floated to the bottom of the ocean during the battle. Nemo confirms that this is indeed the source of his enormous fortune. Arronax briefly mentions that the rest of the world is now deprived of the spoils from the battle, and Nemo is offended. Passionately, he asserts that he acts in solidarity with "the oppressed people of this world." Arronax believes that this is true, and that it is what inspired Nemo to immerse himself in an underwater life.

PART 2, CHAPTER 9: THE LOST CONTINENT

The next morning, Arronax hopes that Ned will have changed his mind about fleeing, but is disappointed to hear that Ned will not give up. Arronax checks the submarine's direction and realizes that it is hurtling away from Europe at a profound speed. Before long, it becomes clear that any window of opportunity they had for escape has closed. When Arronax informs Ned of this fact, he is furious, but Arronax himself is rather relieved. That night, Nemo suggests that they explore the ocean floor at night for the first time, and Arronax enthusiastically agrees.

Walking out in the darkness with Nemo, Arronax half-expects to encounter a subterranean city. They walk through a thick forest, only emerging on the other side after two hours. Arronax wonders where he is, but—due to their helmets—cannot ask Nemo. Instead, he just grabs the captain's arm. Suddenly, Arronax realizes that the mountain towering in front of them is a "semi-active volcano." The area is covered with beautiful architectural ruins, and in the distance, he finds the outline of an Acropolis. It occurs to him that he is in Atlantis. Arronax desperately endeavors to remember everything he can see, but notices that Nemo has is curiously still. On Nemo's gesture, they race back to the *Nautilus*.

In this passage, it becomes obvious that the dilemma facing Arronax is a manifestation of an age-old philosophical question: is it better to be unhappy and free, or happy and controlled or restrained in some manner? For Arronax, the answer is not clear at all.



This passage provides some important points of clarification, yet also leaves key aspects of Nemo's character unclear. It makes sense that Nemo has been able to acquire so much wealth through raiding shipwrecks. Yet at the same time, Nemo doesn't reveal why he is motivated to gain so much money considering he has no real way of spending it (and seemingly no desire to do so). Furthermore, it is also difficult to see how hoarding all this wealth and traveling alone is a form of acting in solidarity with oppressed people.



It is understandable why Ned feels betrayed by Arronax concluding that they cannot escape, particularly considering that Arronax is secretly relieved about this. Perhaps Ned sense Arronax's relief, which intensifies his resentment.



The myth of Atlantis began with Ancient Greek philosopher Plato, who described it as an island whose navy attacked Athens. After being defeated by Athens, Atlantis sank to the bottom of the sea. Following this original story, there have been many subsequent versions of myths about cities at the bottom of the sea. In the 19th century, given the relatively new possibility of deep-sea exploration, some people mistakenly assumed that such myths were real.



PART 2, CHAPTER 10: SUBMARINE COAL MINES

The next morning, Arronax wakes late and spends the day observing marine life. He spots a “high wall” in the distance, and guesses it’s a mountainous island. The next day, he wakes at eight a.m., and is surprised to find that the ship is covered in darkness. A voice—Nemo’s—announces that they are underground, inside an extinct volcano. Nemo explains that he uses the cave as a place of refuge, where he sources the elements needed to produce the electricity that makes the *Nautilus* run. He will now spend a day loading up the reserve stock of sodium they keep down there.

Arronax, Conseil, and Ned explore the volcanic island. Ned finds a hive of bees, and pauses to gather honey. In the distance, the crew aboard the *Nautilus* are busy at work. The three men catch sight of a number of different birds, including “several fine fat bustards.” Ned enthusiastically sets to work catching one of the birds; although he doesn’t have his gun, he manages to successfully wound one. Less than an hour later, they return to the submarine, and find that the sodium loading is complete.

At this point toward the end of the novel, the reader is given more practical information about how Nemo’s operation actually works. The provision of plausible information is also an important part of the science fiction genre, although some might argue that the details provided here are not particularly realistic and thus may not satisfy the reader’s questions.



There is a sense in which Arronax, Conseil, and Ned are forced into a rather childlike position through their captivity. While Nemo makes all the decisions and does (or supervises) most of the practical work aboard the vessel, the three captives entertain themselves through exploration and missions.



PART 2, CHAPTER 11: SUBMARINE COAL MINES

The *Nautilus* now enters the Sargasso Sea, which is named after the Spanish word for kelp. Following this, it moves through the middle of the Atlantic at a steady pace; Arronax guesses that Nemo is heading back to the South Pacific. He wonders if Nemo will grant them permission to leave at the end of this journey, especially if they promise to never reveal the truth of his identity to anyone. Yet he worries about the consequences of bringing the issue up. A few days later, they pass an underwater mountain range. Arronax comments on the extraordinary nature of the scene before them, and says he wishes they could bring a “souvenir” of what they see.

Somewhat surprised, Nemo points out that it is very easy to take a photograph of the scene before them, and proceeds to do just that. Speaking retrospectively, Arronax explains that he will go on to publish the resulting photograph in his log book. After taking the picture, Nemo comments that it is time for them to journey back up; minutes later, they are back at the ocean’s surface.

It is debatable whether Arronax’s timidity in approaching Nemo is the result of excessive politeness, or whether there is a genuine risk in bringing up the subject of freedom in the wrong manner. Both are likely true to a certain extent—Arronax feels more sympathy toward Nemo than he arguably should, and at the same time, he might be right to be worried about how Nemo would react to this issue.



Judging by the museum in the submarine, Nemo does have a concept of why people want souvenirs—what he doesn’t share is Arronax’s desire to show these souvenirs to others.



PART 2, CHAPTER 12: CACHALOTS AND WHALES

Arronax remains confused about where the submarine is heading. Nemo has been speaking less and less, and Arronax senses that Nemo has a “suppressed anger” within him. Arronax believes that keeping the three men captive is having a terrible impact on Nemo. On March 14, Ned enters Arronax’s room and asks how many people he believes are aboard the *Nautilus*. He insists on calculating the maximum number of people the submarine can hold, although Arronax isn’t sure why he wants to know this information. Nonetheless, Arronax roughly calculates how many men the submarine could contain while underwater before running out of oxygen.

Conseil comments that Ned is swept up in memories of his former life, and the impossible desire to return. Arronax curtly responds that he doesn’t feel especially sympathetic, however Conseil persuades him to be more understanding. They are sitting on the vessel’s platform, and spot a school of whales. Ned exclaims that it’s torture not to be able to harpoon them. Conseil suggests that Ned asks for Nemo’s permission to hunt them, and Ned immediately goes off to do so. Yet Nemo doesn’t grant it, claiming that there would be no purpose to Ned’s killing the whales except “the sheer joy of destruction.” He advises Ned to leave them alone.

However, Nemo then points out another mass in the ocean, arguing that these are “cachalots” (sperm whales), which are “cruel, marauding creatures.” Yet rather than handing the job over to Ned, Nemo says that the *Nautilus* will attack the animals with its steel spur. The cachalots approach the submarine, aiming for the school of whales Ned initially pointed out. A battle takes place between the two groups of animals, which Arronax describes as a “grewsome, gorgeous fight.” After it is over, the water around them is strewn with the wounded, mutilated corpses of the creatures. Ned and Nemo exchange tense words, and Arronax worries that Ned’s resentment of Nemo is going to escalate to dangerous proportions.

PART 2, CHAPTER 13: THE GREAT ICE BARRIER

Arronax remains puzzled over the direction in which the *Nautilus* is heading, wondering if Nemo is aiming to reach the South Pole. They are so far south that there are only a few hours of darkness per night; if they had been there only months earlier, there would have been no darkness at all. The *Nautilus* navigates through icebergs, and Arronax sees cities in their “surprising” shapes. Arronax is stunned by the eerie silence of the region, which makes it seem as if “everything [is] frozen up—even noise.” As the submarine progresses, ice forms over its surface, and Arronax realizes that they have become trapped in a kind of vice.

Arronax’s observation that holding three people captive might be having a negative impact on Nemo is significant. By taking away the freedom of others, Nemo erodes his own humanity. While theoretically having more people on board the ship for companionship might be a positive thing, the reality is that Nemo is troubled by enacting exactly the kind of oppressive behavior that he claims to oppose.



*On one level, Nemo’s reasoning that it is bad to kill anything unless there is a purpose to it seems legitimate, and an important facet of existing in harmony with the natural landscape. Yet it is also clear how Ned could view such a stance as arbitrary (particularly considering how many animals have already been hunted during the *Nautilus*’s journey thus far).*



While Nemo’s statements in the previous passage may have been fairly reasonable, his hatred of sperm whales appears highly arbitrary. Having developed such extensive expertise about the ocean, he imposes his opinions and rules as if they were fact. Yet as the conversations between Arronax and Ned show, there are multiple ways of knowing the ocean. As a harpooner, Ned has a different kind of expertise that is still valuable.



The fact that Arronax keeps seeing cities inside the shapes of the natural landscape clearly conveys how much he misses civilization, even if it something he won’t quite admit to himself. Meanwhile, the eerie silence of the ocean becomes a symbol for how the captives have been cut off from the outside world and made to live in an almost timeless, frozen isolation.



While Arronax is convinced that the vessel is stuck, Nemo remains confident that it will come loose, and that they will be able to go even further south. Arronax is horrified by this idea. Nemo explains that he hopes to go under the Great Ice Barrier, noting that he wonders whether there will be enough oxygen. Arronax says that there is more than enough oxygen in the reservoirs, and Nemo agrees that this is true. Nemo then says that his only remaining concern is if the South Pole is covered with ice, meaning the submarine could not come up to the surface, but Arronax notes that the spur will be able to bore through the ice. Satisfied, Nemo sets about preparing for the expedition.

The *Nautilus* descends into the icy depths of the sea. Several times it attempts to return to the surface to replenish its oxygen supply, but—as expected—is met by a ceiling of thick ice. Arronax has difficulty sleeping, and finds that he can barely tell “whether [he is] asleep or waking.” Finally, Nemo bursts into the saloon with the news that they have reached a patch of open sea.

PART 2, CHAPTER 14: THE SOUTH POLE

Arronax rushes up to the platform. He asks Nemo if they are at the South Pole, but Nemo isn’t sure. Along with Conseil, the two men set to work observing the local plants, sea creatures, and birds, including penguins. Arronax notices that Nemo seems “impatient and vexed.” They pass some walruses, which Conseil doesn’t recognize because he has never seen them before. They also see seals, which Arronax thinks look like elegant women. They hear the walruses making loud sounds, and Arronax speculates that they are playing. It is March 20, the day before the spring equinox. Nemo observes that the next day, they will be able to measure by the light whether they are at the exact spot of the South Pole.

The next morning, Arronax invites Ned to join the observation, but he refuses. Ned has been seeming increasingly miserable and furious by the day. After breakfast, Arronax joins Nemo and two crew members on a boat, bringing measuring instruments with them. Passing whales, they arrive at their destination at nine a.m. As Nemo measures their location, Arronax heart hammers in anticipation. He shouts for joy as they realize they are indeed exactly at the South Pole. Nemo solemnly announces that he has “take[n] possession” of the South Pole, doing so by no authority other than his own.

This conversation between Arronax and Nemo—in which Nemo manages to get Arronax to convince him that going under the Great Ice Barrier is safe, despite Arronax not necessarily intending to do so—illuminates the strange bond that has developed between them. Nemo clearly respects Arronax and enjoys having a companion around with whom he can discuss scientific matters. Perhaps this is one reason why he won’t fathom letting the captives go free.



There is something self-destructive about Nemo’s desire to constantly flirt with dangerous marine landscapes. It almost seems as if he is intent on finding ways to get close to death before escaping it.



The peculiar situation of the captives continues: while they remain miserably imprisoned, the delights of the natural world are so wonderful that they succeed in momentarily distracting them from their plight. Nemo’s hope to reach the exact point of the South Pole, meanwhile, conveys a hint of the colonial explorer’s desire to “conquer” the earth.



The moment of sheer triumph at having reached the South Pole is moving, but it quickly turns sinister as Nemo confirms his similarity to colonizers who seek to claim land as their own. Of course, there is an extent to which Nemo’s act is tongue-in-cheek; yet his despotic nature suggests that there is indeed a part of him that wants to truly “possess” the South Pole.



PART 2, CHAPTER 15: AN OVERTURNED MOUNTAIN

The next morning they prepare to leave “Nemo Land.” Before long, the *Nautilus* has descended back into the water and is underneath the Great Ice Barrier again. At three a.m. Arronax wakes up suddenly, feeling the submarine be tossed violently around. Everyone else aboard the vessel is awake, too, and shouts in confusion, although Nemo is nowhere to be seen. They sit in the saloon, hoping he might appear. Just at the point when the tension builds to an unbearable degree, Nemo appears and says there’s been a “very serious” accident. He explains that there’s nothing they could have done to prevent—a gigantic iceberg turned over, and in doing so knocked the *Nautilus* onto an ice bed.

Nemo is attempting to drive the *Nautilus* back up to the surface of the ocean, but as it goes up, the ice bed goes with it. Eventually, they manage to get moving, and as they go Arronax, Ned, and Conseil gaze out the vessel’s window at the beauty of the ice. However, suddenly this ice turns blinding—the submarine is going at its highest speed, causing the ice to flash like “diamonds.” Around five a.m., the vessel starts going backward. Arronax feigns confidence, but is worried that this plan won’t work. He picks up a book and reads absently. Fifteen minutes later Conseil comments on the book Arronax is reading, which Arronax immediately realizes was the one he wrote. Furthermore, he’s holding it upside down.

Everyone sits together for the ensuing hours, worried. Finally, there is another jolt to the boat, and Arronax grabs Conseil’s hand in terror. Nemo enters, and says that they are walled in by ice on every side.

PART 2, CHAPTER 16: A LIVING TOMB

The *Nautilus* is imprisoned in a cage of ice. Nemo calmly says that they will die in one of two ways—they will either be crushed, or suffocated. The oxygen reservoirs have about two days’ worth of air left. He says they will try to escape the ice trap by penetrating the walls. Arronax, Conseil, and Ned agree to participate in the effort to break the ice, and don their wet suits. They hack at the ice with pickaxes, going in rounds so as not to exhaust themselves. Back in the submarine, Arronax notices the intense presence of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, and feels weak as a result. It soon becomes clear that, given the progress already made, it would take the men five days to successfully hack through the ice.

This terrifying turn of events is perfectly timed to be a warning sign against hubris. Just after Nemo declares himself the owner of the South Pole, nature asserts its supreme power over the vessel. This serves as an important lesson that no human truly owns land, and that it is likewise impossible to ever have true control over the natural landscape.



*The moment when the beauty of the ice turns blinding is an important metaphor for the way in which nature is simultaneously beautiful and dangerous. This has proven particularly true on the journey of the *Nautilus*. Again and again, Nemo has shown the captives spectacular sights—yet many if not most of these occasions resulted in the characters being placed in mortal danger by the very natural landscape they had just been admiring.*



The submarine getting trapped in ice is clearly a metaphor for how this vessel of freedom ends up being a zone of constraint.



This nightmarish situation represents the very worst of what can happen on a submarine. Again, the fact that the characters end up in a situation of ultimate confinement shows how, for Nemo, the pursuit of freedom and the inevitability of constraint are bound up in each other.



The situation is terrifying, but having worked so hard already, the men are all determined to go down fighting. They keep working, but when Arronax gets back to the ship he finds that he's almost "choked" by all the carbon dioxide. Although Nemo lets in more oxygen to the atmosphere, it doesn't stop the feeling of "suffocation." The next day Arronax keeps working, but begins to feel that there is no point to such arduous labor if they are going to die anyway. He discusses their options with Nemo, who reveals that the oxygen will run out the next day. Suddenly, Nemo suggests using boiling water to melt the icebergs. Arronax feels excited, thinking that this may just work.

They boil the water and inject into the surrounding ice. Progress is slow, with the outside thermometer changing very gradually. By the next day, they have melted six yards of ice, but the oxygen reservoirs are empty, and the effects can be strongly felt aboard the vessel. Conseil sticks close to Arronax, saying he wishes he could stop breathing to give more oxygen to his "master." Eventually, the vessel breaks free. However, its journey toward the surface is slow enough that they still might not reach it before the oxygen supply runs out. Conseil and Ned discover a few last "drop[s]" of oxygen in a breathing tank and give it to Arronax. He tries to refuse, but they force him to breathe it in. Finally, they break through the water's surface. The crew rips off the panels, and the vessel is flooded with oxygen.

PART 2, CHAPTER 17: FROM CAPE HORN TO THE AMAZON

Arronax isn't sure how he reaches the platform; he thinks Ned possibly carries him. The first words he says are in gratitude to Ned and Conseil. Ned says that he wants to use this moment of bonding for them to promise that they will escape together. However, there remains a problem: they don't know where they are going. They pass Cape Horn, and soon after reach the Falkland Islands. Continuing northward, they find themselves in the middle of the Atlantic. Arronax keenly studies fish he has never had the chance to see up close before. At one point, Conseil is stung by a rayfish, and for the first time in his life cries out for Arronax's help. Once the vessel arrives in Dutch seas, the crew capture and kill six manatees, saving the meat.

This grim situation presents another philosophical dilemma: is it better to fight to the death even when one's chances of success are very slim, or resign oneself to death and, in doing so, pass away in greater comfort? Such a question is related to many contemporary ethical dilemmas, such as conversations around assisted suicide.



Arronax presents Conseil's absolute devotion to him as moving and noble. Yet—particularly to a contemporary reader—such an obscene display of servility is likely to ring alarm bells. It is never revealed why Conseil is such an extraordinarily devoted servant. Particularly considering he has talent and intelligence in his own right, does he not tire of living to serve someone else? The fact that these questions go unanswered means that Conseil remains a rather two-dimensional character.



There is an obvious parallel between the vessel's miraculous return to the surface of the water and the three captives' plan to escape. In the first case, working to find a way out even though success seemed highly unlikely was crucial, and paid off in the end. However, Arronax does not seem willing to see that the same might be true in the context of their escape attempt.



PART 2, CHAPTER 18: THE POULPS

Arronax, Ned, and Conseil discuss their situation. They have now been “prisoners hand and foot” for six months, and there is no indication that this will change. They’ve noticed that Captain Nemo has become increasingly antisocial, and they wonder what it means. Observing the fauna around him, Arronax wonders how he can give up the research opportunities life on the *Nautilus* has afforded him. When they reach the Bahamas, Arronax points out that the caves before them tend to hide gigantic poulps (giant squid). Ned is skeptical that such things exist, but Conseil argues that he has personally witnessed a poulp take down an entire ship.

Ned is incredulous, but Conseil insists it’s true. However, he then reveals that he saw the scene was depicted in a painting he saw in a church. Arronax explains that the painting depicts a scene from a myth. He says that myths about giant squids aren’t true, but that there must be some kind of truth that inspires them. While they continue to discuss the myths, Ned alerts them to a giant squid that can be seen from the window. The three men rush to look at it, and Arronax is stunned to realize that the monster seems to have been angered by the presence of the submarine.

Other poulps then appear, swimming in a kind of “procession” behind the *Nautilus*. Arronax sees Nemo, who looks more dejected than ever. Nemo calmly remarks that a battle is incoming, because one of the poulps has the submarine in its grip. Ned offers to use harpoon the creatures, and Arronax accepts this proposal. At that moment, a sailor shouts for help, but it is too late—he is already in the grip of one of the poulp’s tentacles. Nemo and Ned immediately begin hacking at the monster’s arms. Having successfully harpooned the poulp in its eye, Ned is grabbed by its tentacles himself. Nemo hacks at the poulp’s mouth, freeing Ned. Yet while Ned is saved, Nemo is overcome with tears at the loss of the first sailor.

PART 2, CHAPTER 19: THE GULF STREAM

Nemo is devastated by the battle with the poulps and its aftermath. Arronax is also disturbed, particularly because the dead sailor had cried for help in French, revealing that the two shared a home country. The *Nautilus* floats along aimlessly, going in no particular direction. It ends up in the Gulf Stream. Ned once again approaches Arronax and says that he can’t go on any longer, and that he will go insane if they don’t at least try to fight for their freedom. By this point they have been at sea for seven months, with no contact with anyone on dry land.

It is striking that, even after almost dying so many times (the last of which was highly traumatic), Arronax still remains unsure about whether he is willing to give up the research opportunities provided by life on the Nautilus. Depending on one’s perspective, his commitment to science appears admirably diehard—or totally insane.



Despite their dire circumstances, Ned, Conseil, and Arronax remain playful and humorous. Much of the novel is concerned with myths that turn out to be true—from the lost city of Atlantis to the giant squids. This gives the narrative a fantastical feel, though the heavy presence of scientific detail and technology pushes it into the emergent genre of science fiction.



At first, Nemo’s calm demeanor appeared to be a sign of his extraordinary character and leadership skills. However, now it seems as if he is actually so detached simply because he is depressed. Nemo’s courage in the face of death may actually be an indifference to death—or even a desire for it.



The interminable limbo of life on the Nautilus becomes even more pronounced as Nemo stops actually directing the vessel anywhere and instead lets it float aimlessly. At least before there was some semblance of a mission to their journey, although its final purpose remained unclear. Now, there is simply endless, monotonous floating.



Arronax points out that Nemo has been avoiding him, but Ned urges him to go and find Nemo. Yet when Arronax knocks on Nemo's door, Nemo replies that he is busy. At first the men seem unable to understand each other, but then Nemo gives Arronax a manuscript, explaining that it is a book he's written containing all his "knowledge of the sea." It also includes his life story. Arronax is stunned, thinking that this means Nemo wants the outside world to know his story. However, when Arronax brings up the possibility of himself, Ned, and Conseil leaving the submarine, Nemo gets angry. He insists that no one shall leave the *Nautilus* before death.

Horried, Arronax compares their situation to slavery. He says that they don't have to speak about the topic ever again, but urges Nemo to take pity on Ned, and warns him that Ned might try to take "revenge" for his imprisonment. At this point, the *Nautilus* is not far from Long Island. The vessel gets caught up in a terrible storm. They briefly catch sight of a ship that Arronax guesses is passing between New York and either France or England, but before long the ship disappears back into the mist. The Gulf Stream is living up to its reputation as "King of Tempests." Even deep underwater, the submarine is still violently thrown around by the storm.

PART 2, CHAPTER 20: WE VISIT A TOMB

The storm ruins any chance of the men somehow escaping to the East Coast of North America. They pass Newfoundland, and around this point, Arronax spots an **electric** cable on the ocean floor which had originally been designed to send telegrams yet was abandoned after it stopped working. The *Nautilus* passes Ireland, then England, but does not enter the English channel. On June 1, Arronax is standing on the platform and sees a large steamer in the distance. He hears Nemo announce, "It is here." Confused, he wonders if Nemo is talking about the steamer. The *Nautilus* descends into the ocean, and as it heads down, Arronax sees a shipwreck in the distance.

While Arronax gazes at the shipwreck, Nemo explains that the ship was called the *Marseillais*, and was launched in 1762. He gives a detailed history of the ship, whose name was changed to the *Avenger* in 1794. Nemo comments that this is "the best name in the world."

The beginning of this passage provides a palpable note of hope for Arronax, who is encouraged by the existence of the manuscript in two ways. First, it convinces him that Nemo might one day be planning to leave the submarine after all (or allow his captives to leave). Secondly, Arronax is encouraged from a simply scientific perspective—he wants to know that the knowledge Nemo has gained won't die with him.



Arronax's decision to compare his plight to slavery is significant. Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea was written very shortly after the abolition of slavery at the conclusion of the American Civil War. Arronax's words reflect a shifting consensus that slavery was abhorrent, yet the ease with which he compares himself to an enslaved person suggests that he does not grasp the magnitude of slavery's brutality.



The electric cables lying at the bottom of the ocean floor are an important metaphor for the failures of technology, and human civilization more broadly. While technology can convey phenomenal power, this power will arguably always be trumped by nature. This idea is visually manifested by the electrical cable that is slowly being reabsorbed into the earth.



This is an important turning point. Previously, Nemo did not speak at length about revenge—instead, his reaction to the horrors of the world was simply self-imposed exile. However, now this has clearly shifted, as evidenced by Nemo's reverence for the name Avenger.



PART 2, CHAPTER 21: HUMAN SACRIFICE

Arronax is moved by the emotion in Nemo's voice as he speaks about the name *Avenger*. It is finally becoming clear to Arronax that Nemo was driven to his life in the ocean by "wrath, either monstrous or sublime." Arronax narrates that he will soon learn the source of Nemo's resentment, but for now, he is distracted by a faint booming sound. He goes up to the platform, where Ned and Conseil are already standing and looking out at a vessel in the distance, the steamer Arronax saw before. The men observe that it's a warship, but they can't tell from which country it's from, as there is no flag visible anywhere. Arronax predicts that regardless of the ship's origin, it will probably accept them as "castaways"—but they must reach it first.

The men then realize that the warship is firing at the *Nautilus*. Arronax realizes that ever since the sinking of the *Abraham Lincoln*, the whole world must have been on the lookout for the *Nautilus*, which people now realize is not a narwhal but an "engine of destruction." As such, this ship will treat the submarine as an enemy. Ned suggests that they try to show that they are friendly and begins waving a handkerchief, but Nemo calls him an "idiot." Nemo then shouts mockingly at the other ship, encouraging them to shoot, but saying that he doesn't want them to go down here and lie in the same place as the *Avenger*.

Nemo claims that he is "the oppressed" and that the ship before them is his "oppressor," who took his family from him. Arronax finds Ned and Conseil and suggests that they take this opportunity to try and escape on the other ship. Ned agrees, but suggests they wait until night. At three a.m., Arronax returns to the platform to find Nemo still standing there. Arronax stays until six a.m., and in all this time Nemo doesn't seem to notice him. He then goes down into the saloon and solemnly tells Ned and Conseil that the moment they have been waiting for has arrived. They shake hands. However, just as they go to move the submarine suddenly starts descending. Arronax realizes that Nemo intends to strike the other ship from beneath.

Arronax finds himself in despair, unsure of what to do. The submarine accelerates, and Arronax runs into the saloon, where he finds Nemo. Nemo is staring out of the window at the other ship, which is now an "open shell" with water pouring in. People are desperately trying to save themselves from drowning, to no avail. There is an explosion, destroying much of what remains of the ship. Arronax stares at Nemo, aghast. He watches as Nemo goes into his room and stares at a portrait of a woman and two children. Looking at the portrait, Nemo breaks down in tears.

The fact that the warship does not appear to belong to any particular country is important. Instead of denoting a single nation, it comes to represent civilization in general—both the good and the bad. For the captives, it offers a chance of escape. Yet the fact that it is a formidable military vessel evokes the brutality and injustice of imperial power.



Nemo evidently has a personal vendetta against this ship and the power it represents, though the fact that the reader doesn't learn what this power actually is heightens the mystery surrounding his character. In a sense, it doesn't matter: Nemo's vague solidarity with oppressed people against oppressors now involves a suitably nonspecific enemy.



Nemo's use of language here is strangely abstract—it is difficult to imagine any real person referring to "the oppressed" and "the oppressor" when it comes to their own personal life. It seems as if Nemo may be experiencing some kind of mental breakdown, finally feeling the effects of his life of isolation and whatever trauma he experienced that drove him undersea in the first place.



The juxtaposition of events in this passage makes it clear that Nemo's final act of violence is rooted in his own trauma—seemingly the murder of his wife and children. Though this doesn't justify the killing of all the people on board the other ship, the act could be interpreted as a desperate act of defiance against an imperial aggressor.



PART 2, CHAPTER 22: CAPTAIN NEMO'S LAST WORDS

Arronax is horrified by Nemo's act of vengeance, which he believes cannot possibly be justified. He goes to his room, but cannot sleep. From this point on, Arronax has no idea in which the direction the *Nautilus* is going, and also can't tell the time because all the clocks have been stopped. He guesses that this liminal period lasts around 15 days. He barely sees Nemo, or any members of the *Nautilus*'s crew. Conseil keeps a close eye on Ned, worrying that he will kill himself. However, after 15 days or so Ned informs Arronax that the time has come: they will try to escape that night. They are 20 miles from land, although Ned doesn't know which country it is.

Arronax passionately agrees to join this plan. In the following hours, he feels highly distracted and nervous, but forces himself to eat so that he has energy. He goes to the museum and tries to burn the items in there into his memory, thinking about what a shame it is that no one else may ever see them again. He thinks about everything that's happened since he was brought aboard the *Nautilus*, which now appear to him like "scenes in a drama." In his mind, Nemo has become a kind of sea-monster. Suddenly, Nemo wakes and realizes that he was dreaming. With half an hour left until he is supposed to leave, he hears the sound of the organ.

Arronax creeps into the saloon and finds it dark, but the sounds of the organ assure him that Nemo is in there. Just as it seems as if Arronax has successfully managed to sneak past him, Nemo indicates that he is aware of the presence of the three captives. Ned begs for him to just let them go, and silently hands Arronax a dagger. Suddenly, Arronax realizes that the *Nautilus* is nearing the infamous maelstrom on the coast of Norway—a "whirlpool from which no ship ever escapes." Arronax feels the submarine spinning and grows faint with horror. Ned shouts that they should try and hold on to something, but at that moment there is a loud crashing sound and Arronax passes out.

Perhaps the most traumatic part of Arronax's experience here is not the horror of watching people be murdered before his eyes, but the subsiding of this climactic moment back into the mundane, endless limbo that he has been trapped in for so long already. Arronax appears to indeed be in a kind of hell, although the other captives have miraculously managed to maintain hope.



Nemo's final moments aboard the submarine become surreal, almost like a dream sequence. After spending so long trapped in a confined space and endless monotony, the idea of leaving must seem unbelievable. Meanwhile, Arronax's trauma leads him to conceptualize Nemo as a sea monster, a framing that Nemo himself might actually approve of.



In a final twist, the captives' escape attempt is almost thwarted—yet they are saved by nature. The whirlpool can be interpreted as a manifestation of the will of the ocean, which (literally) overturns Nemo's hubristic plans and finally frees the captives—albeit in an extremely violent manner.



PART 2, CHAPTER 23: CONCLUSION

None of the three captives know what happens next. When Arronax wakes up, he is on land, lying in the hut of a fisherman on the Lofoden Isles. He is lying next Ned and Conseil, and they all hug each other tightly. It takes a while for them to be able to travel back to France, but they eventually do so. Arronax assures the reader that everything he has recounted really happened, although he's not sure if people will believe him. In 10 months, he travelled underwater for 20,000 leagues. He doesn't know what ultimately happened to the *Nautilus*, Nemo, or his manuscript. He hopes that if Nemo is still alive, "the hatred in his savage heart" has subsided. Nonetheless, he will admit that he and Nemo are the only two people on Earth who truly understand the deep sea.

Arronax's decision to call Nemo "savage" ends up confirming the alignment Nemo claimed to have with colonized peoples of the world. Indeed, this could be seen as evidence in support of the interpretation that Nemo is from India or another nation subject to colonial rule. In any case, by reducing Nemo's anger and trauma to "savagery," Arronax treats the power dynamics between the oppressed and oppressor in a dismissive manner. Ultimately, Arronax is left with a level of respect for Nemo and a sense of camaraderie with the captain, suggesting that for Arronax, their mutual appreciation of scientific exploration and knowledge at least somewhat negates Nemo's tyrannical imprisonment of Arronax and his companions.





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