

Study Guide for

Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World

This film is based on two novels by Patrick O'Brian, from a series that eventually numbered twenty-one. Most of the events take place upon various English warships during the Napoleonic Wars between England and France (lasting from approximately 1799 to 1815).

Notable Characters

“Lucky Jack” Aubrey – captain of the *H.M.S. Surprise*. Aubrey, played by Russell Crowe in this film, is a model Naval captain – he’s loyal, brave, decisive, and smart. He’s as ill-suited to life on land (falling into debt, fathering an illegitimate child, etc.) as he is well-suited to life at sea. (In this, Aubrey is similar to the actor who portrays him.)

Dr. Stephen Maturin – the ship’s surgeon. While he knows almost nothing about ships (he’s not actually in the Navy), Maturin is held in high esteem by the members of the crew, largely for an incident depicted in this movie where he performs brain surgery. (All the surgery performed in this story, incidentally, is done in the days before general anesthesia.) Maturin is by inclination a naturalist. He is also a spy (although he does no spying in this story). Although he and Captain Aubrey are very different men, they are very close friends.

Ist Lieutenant Tom Pullings – Aubrey’s second-in-command.

Lord Blakeney – the young blond boy. Obviously from an important family (he’s a Lord), he’s been given a commission aboard the *Surprise*.

Mr. Hollom – a young, unconfident, indecisive officer deemed to be a “Jonah” by the crew.

Joe Plaice – recovering from brain surgery. Superstitious and religious.

Joseph Nagle – carpenter’s mate. One of the crew. Runs afoul of Aubrey for a disciplinary infraction.

Killick – the captain’s cranky but devoted steward.

Study Questions

1. Mr. Hollom has a difficult choice to make as to whether or not to “beat to quarters”. What does he decide to do?
2. What strategy does Captain Aubrey use to escape from the bigger, faster, and better-armed *Acheron*?
3. In the fight between the *Surprise* and the *Acheron*, the French ship “had the weather gauge” which gave a sailing ship a big advantage. What was the nature of that advantage?
4. Mr. Lamb, the carpenter of the *Surprise*, is called upon to repair the mast. He’s worried that his repair may not be good enough. What is Aubrey’s response?
5. Aubrey gives young Lord Blakeney a book about the English naval hero Lord Nelson. What does Lord Blakeney have in common with Lord Nelson?
6. By lucky chance, Aubrey is given a model of the hull of the *Acheron* (which he calls “the future”). This answers a question that the crew had as to why their cannonballs seemed to have no effect upon the *Acheron*. Why is that?
7. Regarding Lord Nelson: “he was not a great _____, but he was a great _____.”

8. The *Acheron* sneaks up on the *Surprise* for the second time, and another battle seems likely. What strategy is chosen by the bold Captain Aubrey?

9. How is the *Surprise* able to escape from the *Acheron* this time?

10. Having escaped from the *Acheron*, Captain Aubrey orders a change of the *Surprise*'s course. What is his intention in doing so?

11. What difficult decision does Aubrey have to make during the storm? Why did he do such a harsh thing?

12. [Activating your prior knowledge – if you have it.] Dr. Maturin is disappointed that he cannot visit the Galapagos Islands (as Captain Jack had promised him). He would have been the first naturalist on the island. What other famous naturalist later visited the Galapagos?

13. Captain Aubrey is a great believer in gunnery practice. How does he reward his crew for lowering their time between rounds from 2:01 to 1:10?

14. Why does Aubrey not want to flog Nagle?

15. Why does he feel he has to?

16. What causes the doctor to be accidentally shot?

17. Who operates on the wounded Doctor?

18. What (non-scientific) discovery does Dr. Maturin make while exploring the island?

19. What idea does Aubrey get from the *phasmid*?

20. Lord Blakeney instructs all the sailors on the Surprise to tie their neckcloths around their right upper arm. Why?

21. Captain Aubrey has ordered the rear wheels taken off one set of cannon. This means that, despite all their practice, they will only be able to fire one round from those guns. Why has Aubrey made that decision, when he is already outgunned by the *Acheron*?

22. Why does Aubrey order a change of course and to “beat to quarters” at the end of the movie?