***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 25 –The Advocate***

***Summary:***

* This is the first major chapter that interrupts the "plot" of the novel in order to discuss whaling in general. Don’t tune out, though: some of Melville’s best jokes are in these chapters.
* Ishmael becomes a kind of advocate for whaling as an activity. He argues that whaling is a worthwhile profession and not an "unpoetical and disreputable pursuit" (24.1), as some people argue.
* Ishmael establishes that whaling isn’t respected as a profession: you couldn’t have a calling card in high society that says you’re a harpooneer, he points out.
* The first reason people object to whaling is that it seems like butchery. Ishmael admits that it is, but argues that military service is much bloodier and involves more bloodshed, and it’s considered honorable.
* Ishmael reminds the reader that many of the lamps and candles in the Western world are (at this point in time, the mid-nineteenth century) made with whale oil and whale blubber.
* Ishmael tells the reader some whaling history and statistics, showing that whaling has been respected and honored by kings—and that it’s really very profitable.
* Ishmael also claims that, over the past sixty years, whaling has made the world a lot safer. For example, according to Ishmael, whaling ships were the first to go to many distant countries and establish relationships with unknown peoples.
* Ishmael then brings up a series of aesthetic objections to whaling that he proceeds to shoot down:
* If you argue that there aren’t any famous epic stories about whaling? Ishmael answers with the book of Job, the writings of Alfred the Great about a Norwegian whaler, and a speech made in Parliament by Englishman Edmund Burke referencing whaling.
* If you argue that whalemen aren’t noble? Ishmael snaps back that Benjamin Franklin is distantly related to a whaling family.
* If you argue that whaling isn’t respectable? Ishmael points out that the whale is called "a royal fish."
* If you argue that the whale "never figured in any grand imposing way"? Ishmael hits you with a famous Roman procession that involved the bones of a whale.
* If you argue that there is "no dignity in whaling"? Ishmael gets in a constellation in the south called Cetus (the whale). What’s more, Ishmael respects Queequeg, and those who can kill whales more generally, more than any king or general who has stormed human towns.
* Finally, Ishmael says that, if there is any value in his own behavior or in his manuscript, he’ll give all the glory to whaling, because it has taught him everything he knows.

***Synopsis***:

Ishmael proceeds to stand up for the whaling profession, arguing that whaling is heroic, economically critical, and has expanded geographical knowledge. He defends the dignity of whaling by pointing to the involvement of noble families in the industry, to the fact that the Bible and other books mention whales, and to the fact that Cetus, the whale, is a constellation in the southern sky. Ishmael closes by declaring that anything worthwhile that he might accomplish can be credited to his time spent on a whaling ship, his “Yale College” and his “Harvard.”

***Brief Analysis:***

The business of whaling is not considered by those in the liberal professions and is largely unnoticed, likely because others believe that the vocation amounts to a butchering sort of business. Yet this is an important business, as shown by the Dutch, who have admirals of their whaling fleets, or the lavish expenses bestowed on whaling fleets by Louis XVI. Ishmael refutes the claim that the whaler has no famous author or chronicler by citing Job, who wrote the first account of the Leviathan. There is dignity in whaling, an imperial profession. Ishmael calls a whale ship his Yale and his Harvard.

One of the primary reasons that [Moby Dick](https://www.gradesaver.com/moby-dick) is considered a paramount of American literature is its stylistic ambition; the novel encompasses a wide range of genres and shifts in and out of them while interrupting the narrative. Here Melville abandons the actual plot of the novel to indulge in an argumentative essay concerning the merits of whaling. In terms of the novel as a whole, this chapter serves to equate whaling with something larger and more significant through the allusions to Louis XVI and Jonah. The numerous reference to the whale as a Leviathan are certain significant in a political context as well, recalling the title of the famous political tract by Thomas Hobbes in which he names the machinery of the state a "Leviathan." These allusions give added significance to the whaling mission, imbuing it with political and social connotations that will become more clear as the novel progresses.

***Analysis:***

“The Advocate” approaches a similar question from the opposite end. Why, Ishmael asks, does society shun whaling as an unrespectable profession? Whaling is no more barbarous, nor requiring of any less bravery than military command, yet military command holds a much higher prestige in society. Whaling vessels have anonymously contributed more to the pursuit of discovery and exploration than the famous voyages of Captain Cook and others, but with no recognition of the feat. Whaling also contributes immensely to the world economy, and provides many highly useful commodities. In short, whaling deserves a much higher esteem than society affords.

At root, underneath the high salaries, underneath the impressive degrees from selective and expensive private universities, doctors and lawyers are practitioners, like plumbers, electricians, and engineers. All of these professions require great skill and craft, so why might the comparison seem like a loss of prestige for doctors and lawyers? Perhaps we don’t bestow upon other skilled laborers the respect they deserve.

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***Significance***

A turning point in the book: land > sea—a “[lee shore](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/a/a4/Lee_and_windward_shores.svg/500px-Lee_and_windward_shores.svg.png)” is a coastline toward which a ship might be blown by the wind—the beginning of Ishmael’s life at sea aboard the Pequod—this turning point in the book is given shape by the character of Bulkington, who Ishmael sees standing at the helm of the *Pequod* as she makes for the Atlantic—”this six-inch chapter is the stoneless grave of Bulkington”—having just landed from a dangerous four-year voyage, Bulkington is setting out again—”The land seemed scorching to his feet.”—like a ship, Bulkington has limited need for landed existence—a quick touch down and back to sea is right for both—porting provides safety, comfort, and company, but it can also, Ishmael notes, prove disastrous: “one touch of land, though it but graze the keel, would make her shudder through and through”—the ship “fights ‘gainst the very winds that would fain blow her homeward”—like Bulkington, “seeks all the lashed sea’s landlessness again”—Ishmael’s mediation on the lee shore and Bulkington leads him to poetic effusions on this “mortally intolerable truth”: “that all deep earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore”—lee shore = threshold between land and sea = borderline between mortality and immortality—”in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God”—Doesn’t look like Bulkington’s going to make it back to port from the “howling infinite” this time, but he lives forever: “Up from the spray of they ocean-perishing—[straight up, leaps thy apotheosis!”](https://chasingflukes.com/reading_guide-overview/glossary-contents/23apotheosis/).

***Summary and Analysis Part by Part:***

***Summary Part 1:***

[Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) serves as an “advocate” to the reader, in this chapter, of the practice of hunting whales, [Queequeg’s](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/queequeg) profession and that of other harpooneers and sailors on the Pequod. Ishmael wonders aloud why whaling is not afforded more respect as a profession in the United States and around the world, and concludes that there must be some misunderstanding as to its form of “butchery,” since whaling is in some sense no more gory than is warfare or other forms of hunting.

***Analysis Part 1:***

Ishmael enjoys putting on “parts” in his conversations with the reader. Here, he plays the role of the lawyer, or advocate, making a case about whaling. In other places, Ishmael is a willing raconteur, telling stories, or a scientist or “natural philosopher,” attempting to make biological sense of the whale. Here he makes the case that whaling is as noble as war, or put another way that there is no reason to see war as noble and whaling as not.

***Summary Part 2:***

[Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) goes on to say that whaling is responsible for a great many of the advances in nineteenth century society, apart from its primary function: the provision of sperm-oil for oil lamps, the lamps that lit all of Europe and the Western world in the early 1800s. Ishmael says that, strikingly, whalers are some of the great explorers of the world—they have blazed watery trails throughout Australia, the Polynesian islands, and parts of Japan and the far east, although other explorers tend to get more credit for these “discoveries” than do whalers.

***Analysis Part 2:***

Ishmael also has a certain agenda with the reader: to explain that whaling is not just a noble or a heroic pursuit—but that whaling is itself one of the most important activities of man. Ishmael does this by arguing, almost as a kind of conspiracy theory, that whalers are “behind” the greatest innovations and discoveries of man. In other words, Ishmael believes that whalers are the secret engines of 1800s US society.

***Summary Part 3:***[Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) closes the chapter by saying that perhaps the profession of whaling does not have its great “chronicler,” even though many noble men, and descendants of important men, have taken up whaling as a way of making a living. Ishmael states that [Queequeg](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/queequeg), and men like him, are of inherently noble and distinguished character. And Ishmael concludes, implicitly, that perhaps the manuscript of this account, which forms the novel Moby Dick, might be his testament to the greatness and heroism inherent to whaling.

***Analysis Part 3:***

Ishmael, in a move that today would be considered “postmodern,” addresses the act of composition of the book itself, saying that, in part, his job is to “speak” for those who will not speak for themselves—people like his companion Queequeg. In this sense, Ishmael is aware of, and indeed infuses the novel with, the idea of “writing a novel.” This self-awareness was considered strange in Melville’s time, and was a precursor to later developments in fictional narrative.