***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 26 – Knights and Squires***

***Summary:***

* Ishmael describes the first mate of the *Pequod*, Starbuck. (However, we’ve got to note that, at this point in the novel, the distinctive story-telling voice of Ishmael is fading further and further away as the narrator seems to become Melville himself.)
* Starbuck is a Nantucket Quaker, and he’s basically the goody-two-shoes play-by-the-rules do-it-by-the-book officer on the ship.
* Starbuck’s most striking physical characteristic is his leanness—he seems tight, dry, and condensed, and looks like he could endure terrible weather.
* Personally, Starbuck is "steadfast" and conscientious (26.1); he’s also a little bit superstitious, but in an intelligent way.
* He wants all his sailors to be afraid of whales, because men who respect the power and danger of the whale will be better companions than cocky guys who take stupid risks.
* Starbuck is also a reasonable and pragmatic fellow; he’s brave, but always weighing the pros and cons of behaving bravely in any particular situation. He’s not one for extreme risks.
* Still, Ishmael can tell that there’s some deep flaw in Starbuck that could break him and ruin all his courage.
* Ishmael (or perhaps the speaking voice is Melville) assures the reader that Starbuck *isn’t* going to be completely broken in the course of the novel. That would violate the essential dignity of man in some way.
* The narrator (Ishmael or Melville) explains that, if he’s going to exalt and glorify men who seem lowly, then that’s just the result of the democratic equality of men.
* After all, men like John Bunyan (the author of *A Pilgrim’s Progress*, who was a convict), Miguel de Cervantes (the author of *Don Quixote*, who was disabled and a pauper) and Andrew Jackson (the seventh president of the United States, who grew up poor) have been glorified by history.

***Synopsis***:

In the first of the two chapters called “Knights and Squires,” we meet the first mate, Starbuck, a pragmatic, reliable Nantucketer. Starbuck believes that it is rational—and necessary—to fear whales, and his reverence for nature inclines him toward superstition. He is characterized by the other officers of the Pequod as “careful,” although this term is relative when used to describe a whaler. Speaking about Starbuck leads Ishmael to reflect upon the dignity of the working man. Ishmael finds evidence of God in even the “meanest mariners” and admits that he will frequently ignore people’s faults to emphasize their “democratic dignity.”

***Brief Analysis:***

Starbuck is a native of Nantucket and a Quaker by descent. He is quite thin, which seems to be a condensation of the man, who is by no means ill-looking. He is no crusader after perils, for in him courage is not a sentiment but a thing that is useful. Ishmael posits that man in the ideal, is so noble and sparkling, that "over any ignominious blemish in him all his fellows should run to throw their costliest robes."

Starbuck serves as a contrast to the grand and obsessive Ishmael; he is more rational and grounded than Ishmael, a man pared down to his most basic values and ideals. In some sense, Starbuck represents efficiency and rationality, but he also has a core of idealism that endows him with a great sense of nobility and a faith in mankind that starkly conflicts with the dark and brooding sense of humanity held by Ahab. These qualities in Starbuck foreshadow later conflict between Ahab and Starbuck; Melville creates such a contrast between the two characters' values that a conflict between the obsessive Ahab and the rational Starbuck seems inevitable.

***Analysis:***

The mystery of Starbuck—”chief mate of the Pequod”—native Nantucketer—appears capable of surviving any climate—he’s thin, apparently: “But his thinness, so to speak, seemed no more the token of wasting anxieties and cares, than it seemed the indication of any bodily blight”—he’ll endure like a mummy, Ishmael says—multiple voyages had melded Starbuck into a soldier of the sea—he has many captain-like qualities—”Uncommonly conscientious”—inclined to superstition, but a sort of superstition that seemed “rather to spring, somehow, from intelligence than from ignorance”—”far-away domestic memories of his young Cape wife and child at home” don’t incline him to overly dangerous whale hunts—#safetyfirst? – “we shall ere long see what that word ‘careful’ precisely means when used by a man like Stubb, or almost any other whale hunter” (Ishmael too?)—night whale hunts are not allowed—Starbuck knew that people who had no fear were determined to endanger himself and the ship—“I will have no man in my boat […] who is not afraid of a whale.”—another reason for his sense of self-preservation: his father and brother both died chasing whales—some men are such good leaders that their followers will cover them with robes and adorn him; in the ocean these leaders are given a hammer and put back to work—Starbuck is a great leader and is a safe commander who seems to have his head on straight compared to the others of the crew—even if he had a failing, we wouldn’t know it—”But were the coming narrative to reveal in any instance, the complete abasement of poor Starbuck’s fortitude, scarce might I have the heart to write it.”—we got to cover up people’s faults by virtue of some “immaculate manliness”—it’s a God-given right to maintain “dignity”—Ishmael asks God, [“who didst clothe with doubly hammered leaves of finest gold, the stumped and paupered arm of old Cervantes,”](https://chasingflukes.com/reading_guide-overview/glossary-contents/26cervantes/) to bless *Moby-Dick* like he blessed Andrew Jackson.

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

***Summary Part 1:***

[Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) takes a moment to introduce the leadership of the Pequod. [Starbuck](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/starbuck), the first mate, is a Nantucketer and a Quaker, and Ishmael describes him as a skinny, tanned man seemingly “born of a drought,” as though his “skin is too tight.” Ishmael notes that Starbuck is also a superstitious man, more out of an abundance of caution than out of ignorance, and that he is a careful sailor who tells his fellow men always to be afraid of the whale.

***Analysis Part 1:***

Starbuck is an intriguing character—a moral pragmatist and a coward because of it; a careful man who fears convictions that are out of proportion, but who having no such convictions himself is unable to stand against them. That he has wound up as the namesake for a global coffee chain and the best character in Battlestar Galactica (in our opinion) has less to do with his traits and more with the awesomeness of his name. That name does, though, suggest his efforts to "buck" fate (or "stars") in the form of Ahab's quest.

***Summary Part 2:***[Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) goes on to qualify the exact nature of [Starbuck’s](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/starbuck) bravery and personal courage, which, he indicates, the later narrative will reveal. Starbuck, he says, is a man of physical bravery, though he tends to minimize risk if he can. But Starbuck is terrified by more “spiritual” torments, of the kind that will come to afflict the crew of the Pequod. Ishmael says that it is difficult for him to write about the “abasement” of any man’s moral strength, implying again that perhaps Starbuck’s spiritual courage was wanting in the later pursuit of the whale. Ishmael ends the chapter by noting that he will later extol the virtues of other courageous men, whose courage might not be immediately evident.

***Analysis Part 2:***

Ishmael wants the reader to know, without ambiguity, that Starbuck will be central to the novel’s moral considerations. Indeed, as Ahab later states, during the chase, Starbuck’s caution and Stubb’s bravado will form the “two poles” of human behavior, between which Ahab tries to steer. But, in truth, Ahab is neither patient and cautious, like Starbuck, nor impetuous, like Stubb. His is a third way—one characterized by “monomania,” or the pursuit of a single objective, at the expense of all others.