***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 28 – Ahab***

***Summary:***

* For a few days after the ship sails, Captain Ahab stays alone in his cabin and nobody sees him.
* It seems like the three mates are completely in charge except that every so often they give random orders that obviously come from someone bossing them around behind the scenes.
* Whenever Ishmael comes on deck, he immediately looks to see whether Captain Ahab is there.
* (Ah, Ishmael, there you are. So, he’s still around in the story.)
* Ishmael’s starting to get pretty nervous about Ahab, especially because of Elijah’s weird prophecies.
* Whenever he’s worried, though, he thinks about the three mates and the harpooneers, who all make him feel a lot more confident about the voyage.
* The ship keeps sailing south, moving from the icy winter weather off the New England coast into gradually less extreme conditions.
* One morning, Ishmael comes on deck for the watch and ...da dum! There’s Captain Ahab.
* Ahab doesn’t look like he’s actually been sick, but he does look "wasted" (28.3), as though he’s almost been burned at the stake but cut away before it actually killed him.
* Starting in his hair and going down one side of his face and neck under his collar, Ahab has a strange white scar.
* Nobody ever talks about it (because it’s not like you can just ask the captain of your ship about his facial disfigurements), so nobody knows whether it’s a birthmark or something that happened to him in a fight or at sea.
* One of the Native American seamen claims that he got it suddenly when he turned forty and that it goes all the way down his body. Happy Birthday, Ahab!
* And, of course, Ahab is missing one leg. Instead of a wooden leg, he has an ivory leg made from a sperm whale’s jawbone.
* He’s able to walk around on the deck of the ship because there are half-inch holes bored in the deck in different places and he can steady the end of the bone leg in them.
* Even though Ahab is on deck, he doesn’t say anything or give any orders. Apparently he’s content to just stand around looking creepy.
* As the weather gets nicer, Ahab gets gradually more pleasant (sometimes he almost smiles) and comes on deck more often, although he still doesn’t say or do anything.
* This continues until May. (Remember that the Pequod began its voyage at Christmas, so it’s been almost six months before Ahab really takes part in the action.)

***Synopsis***:

As the Pequod ranges further south and the weather improves, Ahab finally appears on deck. Ishmael observes him closely. Ahab appears a strong, willful figure, though his encounter with Moby Dick has scarred him both physically and mentally. In addition to missing a leg, Ahab is marked with a white scar down one side of his face that looks like a lightning strike. Rumor has it that the scar suddenly appeared during some “elemental strife at sea.” Ahab stands watch with his false leg, carved from a whale’s jaw, set into a hole bored into the deck.

***Brief Analysis(26-28):***

Ishmael begins Chapter 26 by introducing us to the ship's chief mate, Starbuck. Starbuck is described as a steady young man whose life is guided by his common sense and intelligence. Ishmael indicates that through the story he is about to tell, Starbuck remains the valiant and moral person he first appears to be. Ishmael ends the chapter contemplating that no matter how bad a person is, there is nothing sadder than a man who has lost his valor.

After spending a full chapter talking about Starbuck, Ishmael devotes the next chapter to the rest of the crew. In Chapter 27 Ishmael introduces the second mate Stubb. Stubb is a happy-go-lucky, brave man characterized by his pipe, an accessory he is rarely seen without. The third mate Flask is also fearless in nature and seems to feel the need to destroy all whales he encounters. Ishmael then indicates each of these headsmen, who will later command the whaling boats, is allowed to choose for himself a harpooner. Starbuck picks Queequeg, Stubb chooses Tashtego, a Gay Head Indian, and Flask chooses Daggoo, a Negro-savage.

The only other person in the crew Ishmael refers to by name is Pip, a black boy from Alabama. Pip plays the tambourine and is generally the ship's jester or clown. The only comment Ishmael makes about the remainder of the crew is that only about half of them are American. The rest are Indians or savages. The spots of command are reserved for the native-born Americans while the others provide the muscle power for the ship.

The men are now several days into their journey and Captain Ahab has not yet been seen. The only way the men know he is on board is that the three mates occasionally emerge from Ahab's quarters with new orders. Ishmael relates that now that they are at sea he is extremely uneasy not having yet seen the captain. This uneasiness is intensified when he remembers the words of Elijah concerning Ahab and the ship.

The days go by and slowly the ship moves into warmer climates. Ishmael is stunned one day to see Captain Ahab standing on the deck of the ship. Ahab stands on his quarterdeck with his prosthesis, made from the jawbone of a whale, secured in a hole that is augured into the deck for stability. Ahab is a striking figure. Ishmael describes him as seeming to be made from solid bronze. A scar or birthmark runs from his hairline to the collar of his shirt. Rumor aboard the ship has it that the scar runs the length of his body. No one seems to know where the mark came from. Perhaps as striking as his stance is the grim moodiness that hangs about the man. Ishmael says it looks as if he has a crucifix in his face.

After this initial appearance, Ahab comes to the deck nearly every day for a longer and longer span of time each visit. Ishmael notices that as the climate grows warmer and more spring-like, the captain's moodiness seems to dissolve a bit and his countenance seems to soften.

Following the line of thought presenting whaling as a noble profession, Ishmael refers to the head crewmen in terms of nobility. Ishmael spends an entire chapter talking about the valor of Starbuck, the first mate. From this, it is obvious Ishmael respects Starbuck greatly and wishes not to mar his good reputation. Ishmael lumps the rest of the crewmen together in the next chapter. Of particular note is that only native-born Americans are allowed to be headsmen on whaling ships. This sets precedence for class relations on board the boat with Americans seeming to be more important and more able to lead than other peoples.

At long last, Ishmael lays eyes upon Ahab, the captain of the ship. The tone of the meeting is one of a solemn shock. Ishmael is taken aback by the man's grimness and comments on his lack of any signs of a bodily illness. Already there is superstition about Ahab spreading about the ship concerning a birthmark or scar that runs across his face and neck. These rumors add to the aura of mystery that surrounds the captain.

***Analysis:***

After the Pequod has been at sea for several days, Ahab finally makes his first appearance. Ishmael tries to convince himself that Ahab has simply waited until the ship, sailing south, reached warmer climes. He describes the captain in emblematic ways. From that morning on, more is seen of Ahab.

Suspense is an effective literary device that Melville employs to develop an atmosphere of uncertainty or anticipation in the novel. The mystery surrounding Ahab and the voyage of the Pequod increases daily with Ahab's absence. Elijah's "diabolical" comments haunt Ishmael as he wonders about the captain and visually checks the rear of the ship, where the officer is quartered, whenever Ishmael is on duty. He tries to rationalize that Ahab is just waiting for warmer weather before he comes out of his cabin, but the captain's absence increases the narrator's sense of ominous concern.

When Ishmael finally does see Ahab standing on his quarter-deck one morning, "foreboding shivers" run over the crewman. He describes Ahab in emblematic terms that add to the mystery of the man. The language is especially effective here. The first we learn of the captain's appearance is that he does not seem to be ill but looks "like a man cut away from the stake, when the fire has overrunningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them." Next we are told that Ahab looks like a sculpture of solid bronze; he is compared to an oak or some other sort of great tree. The captain has a prominent scar, "lividly whitish," running from the top of his head down his face and neck until it disappears beneath his clothing. It is compared to the mark of a lightning bolt, and an old Indian on board claims that it runs the length of Ahab's body, "crown to sole"; we get the feeling that a lightning bolt pierced this "grand, ungodly, god-like man" (Chapter 16) to his very soul. There is a grim look on the captain's face, "an infinity of firmest fortitude, a determinate, unsurrenderable" willfulness in his visage. This is all so overpowering that it takes Ishmael a few seconds to notice the leg — a barbaric, white, ivory prosthesis "fashioned from the polished bone of the sperm whale's jaw." The lower tip of the artificial leg is anchored in a hole in the quarter-deck, apparently bored for that purpose. (There is another such hole on the other side of the ship.) The description indicates a man larger than life; touched by heaven's bolt, for good or evil; and partly carved from a sperm whale's jaw.

Glossary

peremptory final, absolute, decisive.

vicariously on behalf of another.

watch any of the periods of duty into which work is divided onboard ship.

Cellini Benvenuto Cellini (1500-71), Italian sculptor also known for his autobiography.

mizzen shrouds the ropes connecting the third mast (from the front) to the ship's sides.

auger a narrow tool for boring holes in wood.

***Significance:***

For several days after leaving Nantucket, nothing is seen of Captain Ahab. The seclusion of Ahab begins to disturb Ishmael, who remembers Elijah's diabolical rants about him. Still, Ishmael concedes that three better chief officers could not be found for the ship. Captain Ahab finally appears on deck one day, bearing no signs of illness and looking like a man cut away from the stake. He seems to be made of solid bronze. There is a slender rod-like mark on his face that appears branded upon him. Ahab stands on an ivory leg, fashioned from the bone of a Sperm Whale's jaw. Ahab gives an appearance of fortitude, but soon withdraws into the cabin. After that morning, he is visible every day to the crew and eventually becomes a little genial and less and less a recluse. In one instance, he even appears to give what in another man would be considered a smile.

Ahab finally receives an introduction in this chapter after a long period of foreshadowing by Melville. In contrast to the portrayals of the other ship officers by Melville, the description of Ahab focuses on the qualities that are inhuman and even mechanical. There are few details akin to those given for Stubb or Starbuck, which emphasize their personalities and ideals; instead, Melville gives a basic physical description of Ahab that compares him to largely inhuman and inanimate objects. The basic impression that Melville gives of Ahab is one of durability; Ahab is a man who shows few basic human characteristics, but instead has been chiseled and formed by his whaling experiences. His ivory leg is a significant aspect of his character, demonstrating both this somewhat inhuman quality to Ahab as well as showing that the whale is an inseparable part of Ahab himself, literally part of his body.

***Analysis in detail:***The chapter in which the mysterious captain comes out—throughout the early parts of the trip the mates gave out all of the orders—”it was plain they but commanded vicariously”—the Captain stays in his cabin while the crew mutters rumors and wonders about their leader—”in the seclusion of the sea” Ishmael’s “vague disquietude” with regards to the unseen captain becomes “almost a [perturbation](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/perturbation)“—he recalls the incoherent forebodings of “that outlandish prophet of the wharves,” Elijah—Ishmael realizes that he enjoys the barbaric crew of the Pequod more than his merchant trip experiences—praise is doled out to the three mates—”Three better, more likely sea-officers and men, each in his own different way, could not readily be found, and they were everyone of them Americans”—Finally, “[r]eality outran apprehension” Captain Ahab makes an appearance—[“His whole high, broad form, seemed made of solid bronze, and shaped in an unalterable mould, like Cellini’s cast Perseus.”](https://chasingflukes.com/reading_guide-overview/glossary-contents/28cellinis-perseus/)—there’s a mark on him, visible upon his brow—”a slender rod-like mark, lividly whitish”—no one knows where the mark comes from, whether Ahab was born with it, but old Tashtego Sr. asserts that Ahab wasn’t branded that way until he was “a full forty years old”—Manxman says its a “birth-mark” that if Ahab were laid out on a slab would stretch “from crown to sole”—his ivory leg is carved from a sperm whale’s jawbone—while on his [quarter-deck](http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-mFrMBelG6Ew/Txtlyw_ZeKI/AAAAAAAACGE/z0yvLmOR5sE/s640/shipsection.jpg), Ahab braces his leg into an auger hole and rotates around like a basketball player on his pivot foot—at first, Ahab strikes a somber presence above deck: “moody stricken Ahab stood before them with a crucifixion in his face; in all the nameless regal overbearing diginity of some mighty woe”—but as the Pequod gets further out to sea, and further away from cold weather, the captain seems to become more at ease—as if the cold was keeping the captain frozen in his head—Ahab does not help with the aspects of sailing and he was unnecessary as having another mast on the boat—”nearly all whaling preparatives needing supervision the mates were fully competent to do”—the seasons change—April and May arrive, almost bringing a smile to Ahab’s face—”the red-cheeked, dancing girls” will “at least send forth some few green sprouts” from even the “most thunder-cloven old oak.”

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

***Summary Part 1:***

[Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) notes that the Pequod goes out into the Atlantic for several days, and still no one in the ship sees [Ahab](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ahab), who hides in his quarters. Ishmael wonders to himself if [Elijah’s](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters) prophecies weren’t true—if Ahab isn’t a cursed, mysterious man. One morning, Ishmael goes onto the quarterdeck, where the captain stands, and sees Ahab there. Ishmael notes that Ahab is a powerful, middle-aged man, with a large white scar running down the side of his body, “like a seam.” Ahab also stands on a white leg made of polished sperm-whale bone, taken from a whale’s jaw.

***Analysis Part 1:***

The notion of a “seam” is an interesting one. For continual mention is made to the fact that Ahab has been “put back together” after his near-deadly fight with Moby Dick—that, indeed, he is like a doll, sewn back into human shape. The question, of course, is whether the patching of Ahab has worked—whether he is indeed a normal man now, capable of leading a crew on the high seas. Ishmael, for his part, appears to recognize in Ahab the potential for a terrifying kind of madness.

***Summary Part 2:***[Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) reports also that [Ahab](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ahab) stands in a sort of “pivot-hole” worn into the deck of the Pequod, where he can rest his white leg while steadying his body and being able to turn around 360 degrees. Ishmael notes that Ahab seems preoccupied and has little to do with the day-to-day operations of the ship, as they are mostly setting out a due course into the Atlantic and south, and the whale-boats have not yet been “lowered” in pursuit of whales.

***Analysis Part 2:***

One of the striking descriptions of Ahab’s disability—here, his “pivot-hole” shows the manner by which the Pequod has been made ready for him, and for his special physical state. Other mechanisms for this include a pulley-system for taking Ahab across to other ships, during gams, and a different pulley for hoisting Ahab up the mast, to spot whales.