***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 31 – The Queen Mab***

***Summary:***

* In the morning, Stubb tells Flask about a dream he had the night before. There’s no doubt that it could easily win a "weirdest whaling dream" contest: Stubb dreams that Ahab kicks him with his ivory/bone leg. Stubb tries to kick him back and his own leg comes off.
* Ahab turns into a pyramid, which Stubb keeps kicking. (It doesn’t seem to matter that one of his legs has come off.)
* In the dream, Stubb seems to realize that being kicked by a false leg is less of an insult than being kicked by a real one, because the false leg isn’t alive and narrows to a little point. (No, that doesn’t make any real sense, but that’s what he thinks in the dream.)
* An old merman appears, grabs Stubb by the shoulders, and turns him around. Stubb decides not to kick the merman because the merman’s covered in spikes.
* The merman tells Stubb to stop kicking Ahab (who is still a pyramid at this point) because it’s actually an honor to be kicked by a great man with an ivory leg—sort of like being slapped by a queen.
* The merman swims off and Stubb wakes up.
* Flask doesn’t think much of Stubb’s dream, but Stubb insists that it’s made him wise, and that now he knows to leave Ahab alone.
* Ahab, meanwhile, calls up to the lookout that he’s spotted whales in the area, and that he’s especially interested in white whales.
* Stubb can tell there’s something special going on with the whole white whale thing. Maybe he’s right…

***Synopsis***:

The next morning, Stubb tells Flask that he dreamed that Ahab kicked him with his ivory leg. An old merman in the dream points out the futility of struggling against Ahab and suggests that it may even be an honor to be kicked by such a man. (The title of this chapter, “Queen Mab,” refers to Shakespeare’s tragedy *Romeo and Juliet,* in which Mercutio explains how Queen Mab, a fairy, brings dreams to sleepers.) As Stubb finishes telling of his dream, Ahab shouts at the crew to be on the lookout for whales. The *Pequod’*s work has begun.

***Critical Study(Ch22-31):***These chapters introduce the other men aboard the ship and begin to describe the onboard dynamics. The disparate nature of the crew, composed of men from various nations, doesn’t prevent the ship from functioning properly. The sense of harmony on the *Pequod* is quite different from the racially divided nineteenth-century American society on land. The leadership structure of the ship is, however, divided by color: the officers are white and the sailors are from the South Sea Islands, Gay Head, Africa, and other far corners of the globe. Ishmael’s offhand remark that Americans provide the “brains” and the rest of the world the “muscle” for this undertaking and many others reveals his belief in the harmony of such an arrangement.

Critic Alan Heimert has suggested that the pairing of mates and harpooners mirrors relationships of oppression in the nineteenth century. Starbuck represents New England and, just as this region depends on the Chinese/South Sea trade, he depends on Queequeg. Stubb represents the American West, and his power derives from his subordination of the Native American Indian, Tashtego. Flask represents the South and both controls and depends upon the African, Daggoo. While these pairings do reflect larger social structures, however, they also involve relationships that are much more complicated and much more interdependent than simple master-slave or boss-worker exchanges. The *Pequod* depends on cooperation for success in catching whales and sometimes for mere survival at sea, and men, in the end, are assessed according to their skill rather than race. Melville explores the development of an alternative, more egalitarian social system aboard the ship throughout *Moby-Dick.*

At this point, the irresistibly charismatic Ahab rules the ship. “[M]oody stricken Ahab [stands] before [his crew] with a crucifixion in his face”; he clearly represents a force that will not be denied. Obedience is crucial to maintaining onboard discipline and the chain of command, and captains were allowed and even expected to be tyrants. The suggestion, in Stubb’s dream, that one should consider it a privilege to be abused by Ahab rationalizes his despotism and hints at the grandiose folly in which the sailors will soon become entangled.

These chapters illustrate Ishmael’s peculiar style of narration. The chronological, plot-driven story is interwoven with digressions, character sketches, and rhetorical exercises. Some chapters, like Chapter 29, are presented as if they were scenes in a play. Ishmael is also given to foreboding language and foreshadowing: the *Pequod* “plunge[s] like fate,” Ahab has a “crucifixion in his face,” and Stubb speaks of something strange going on in the hold. The events that unfold are meant to seem like the fulfillment of Ahab’s destiny and the natural consequence of his megalomaniacal behavior. Ishmael constructs his narrative to suggest and anticipate what will happen rather than to create the effect of surprise.

***Critical Analysis(Ch29-31):***

Ahab spends less and less time in his cabin. "It feels like going down into one's tomb," he is heard to mutter. His nightly pacing on deck, his whale-jaw leg thumping, disturbs some of the crew below. When Stubb humorously asks the captain if the noise might be muffled, Ahab calls the second mate a dog and ten times a donkey, dismissing him. Ahab finds no comfort in a smoke and hurls his lighted pipe into the sea. Stubb has a disturbing dream.

These chapters cast further illumination on the character of Ahab. As the *Pequod* sails farther south and nears the area where whales might be found, its captain grows increasingly restless. His habit of walking the deck at night is particularly disturbing to some of the crew who are trying to sleep below. Stubb's cautious, good-natured attempt to have the captain somehow muffle the constant thumping of his artificial leg is met with hostility from Ahab. Aboard a whaler in the mid-nineteenth century, Ishmael points out, the captain is king.

We see further into Ahab's troubled soul after Stubb is dismissed. Lighting his pipe by the binnacle lamp, the captain sits for an apparent moment of serenity; his mind, however, takes no pleasure in peaceful contemplation. It is driven toward a single goal. He casts the pipe into the waters as brusquely as he dismissed Stubb and resumes his pacing on the planks.

We also learn more of Stubb. In addition to the biblical Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:2-17; Deuteronomy 5:6-22), Stubb has an eleventh ("Think not") and a twelfth ("Sleep when you can"). But this night, sleep brings no respite to Stubb. He dreams that Ahab kicks him with the old man's ivory leg. When Stubb kicks back, the second mate's leg flies off. Ahab suddenly turns into a pyramid; as Stubb kicks at that, a hunchbacked "badger-haired old merman" calls him to desist and says that it's an honor to be kicked by a man as wise as Ahab. Like most of the rest of the crew, Stubb is confused and troubled by his captain's behavior; but he is also drawn to the monomaniacal commander, respects him, sees him as a great man, and will follow Ahab anywhere.

Glossary

**aught**to any degree.

**binnacle**an upright, cylindrical stand holding the ship's compass.

**Queen Mab**in folklore, a fairy queen who controls people's dreams.

***Significance:***[Stubb](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Stubb) tells [Flask](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Flask) about a dream he had: [Captain Ahab](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Captain_Ahab) kicked him with his whalebone leg, and Stubb kicked back, but in doing so, his own leg came off. In the dream, he realized that getting kicked with a whalebone leg is more like getting hit with a cane, which is not as humiliating as getting kicked with a living leg. As Stubb is relating his dream, Ahab shouts out, "There are whales hereabouts! ... If ye see a white one, split your lungs for him!" Stubb and Flask are not sure what to make of this.

In Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, Mercutio describes the fairy Queen Mab as the "fairies' midwife," saying she visits men and women in their sleep and that her presence gives birth to dreams. Mercutio's point is that Romeo's foreboding dreams are likely nothing more than the pranks of Queen Mab, not to be taken too seriously. As the title of this chapter, this reference may suggest that [Stubb](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/" \l "Stubb)'s dream, even though it is about [Captain Ahab](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Captain_Ahab), may just be a silly dream, not a prophetic one. However, it should be noted that Romeo's foreboding dream does seem related to the tragic end of the play. In that case, what is passed off as a silly dream might actually foretell a tragic end.

***Analysis (Ch29-31):***

Ishmael opens the chapter by poetically describing the present spring weather. He then transitions into a discussion of the sleeping habits of Ahab. Ishmael indicates the captain slept very little and would often spend his nights pacing the deck. Generally, those working on the deck at night would try to keep things quiet for those sleeping below; however, Ahab does not consider this. He often wakes the sleeping crew when he paces the deck because his ivory leg making a thumping, thudding noise on the planks each time he steps. Stubb suggests finding some sort of material to wrap the leg in to keep it from making so much noise, but Ahab curses Stubb violently at the suggestion.

As Stubb contemplates his unpleasant encounter with Ahab, he tries to decide how he should react. He first thinks he should strike Ahab in return for the insult, but then decides instead he should pray for the man. Stubb wonders is Ahab is indeed mad as the ship rumors report.

After his confrontation with Stubb, Ahab calls for his stool and pipe. He then sits for a while on deck smoking his pipe. After a few moments, Ahab declares to himself smoking does not bring him the pleasure and relaxation it once did and throws the still lit pipe overboard. He then resumes the deck.

Stubb confides in Flask a dream he had that night concerning Captain Ahab. In his dream, Captain Ahab kicked him with his ivory leg and Stub, in response, tried to kick back and kicked his own leg off. Meanwhile in the dream, Ahab turns into a pyramid that Stubb keeps kicking at until a merman comes along and convinces him a kick by Ahab's ivory leg should be thought of as an honor and not a punishment. While Stubb recalls his dream, Ahab interrupts the discussion with the call that there are whales nearby. He makes a special point that he is to be notified if any of them are white.

In this chapter, the reader gets the first indication that something is not right with Ahab's mental status. In fact, Stubb refers to him as mad after Ahab reacts so violently to Stubb's suggestion that something be done to muffle the loud thumping of the captain's leg on the deck so the crew can sleep. Stubb also shares that Ahab is unable to sleep at night, a situation Stubb considers unjust. This connection of an unjust or otherwise mentally disturbed person and the inability to sleep is relationship commonly used in literature.

Ahab decides that in his torn and stressed state, he is not worth even the small comfort smoking once brought him. The action of throwing the pipe overboard shows the reader how truly mentally anguished Ahab is. Even things that once calmed him, such as smoking, are no comfort to him now.

In Chapter 31, Stubb's dream shows how deeply the encounter with Ahab affects him. The dream may indicate the futility of trying to fight against Ahab and his anger. The merman in the dream reminds Stubb that Ahab is the captain of the ship and that any correction should be accepted gladly and without retort.

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

***Summary Part 1:***

In this short chapter, **[Stubb](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters)** tells [**Flask**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters) of a dream he had the night before—the night he was told off by [**Ahab**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ahab). Stubb dreams that Ahab kicked him with his ivory leg, and after doing so, that Ahab turned into a kind of “pyramid,” and Stubb did his best to kick this pyramid back, but did no damage. Stubb muses, in the dream, as to whether it is better to be hit with a “living” or a “dead” thing—a living hand or foot, rather than an ivory one—and concludes it is far worse to be hit with something living. Then, in the dream, a “merman” with a hunched back appears, and tells Stubb that it was in fact an honor to be kicked by so noble a man as Ahab, and with an ivory leg—a leg worth a great deal of money.

***Analysis Part 1:***

A strange and surreal chapter, which also deviates from the relatively realistic descriptions established in the preceding chapters. The dream equates Ahab with ancient spiritual places (the purposes of which are lost to the understanding of modern men) and Ahab’s ivory leg, here, achieves a kind of symbolic status—an indicator that Ahab is not entirely human, but rather has a part of him that more resembles a machine or an inanimate object. (Queen Mab, by the way, is a mythological bringer of dreams.)

***Summary Part 2:***[Flask](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters) hears out this dream and concludes that it sounds like a “foolish” one. But [Stubb](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters) believes it has given him some useful information about [Ahab](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ahab), and tells Flask that he will not fight with Ahab anymore—he will simply follow the man’s orders. Stubb also tells the third mate that Ahab has been ordering men around to keep their eyes out for whales, especially a white whale. Stubb wonders what this could mean—white whales are exceedingly rare—and hurries to prepare the deck according to Ahab’s wishes.

***Analysis Part 2:***

Stubb here decides to give in to Ahab, to follow his leader who he sees having a kind of greatness to him (even if it is a strange or frightening greatness). It is interesting that Stubb decides this even as he senses that the “white whale” might also be a stand-in for something larger—for a struggle against God and fate. The characters of the novel, interestingly, grasp Moby Dick both as a horrible monster and, simultaneously, as a symbol for other monstrous events in men’s lives, and still follow the monomaniacal Ahab to face it. The grandeur and implacable power of Ahab's almost inhuman will is a critical aspect of the novel.