***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 32 – Cetology***

***Summary:***

* This chapter returns to the first-person point of view, but it doesn’t seem to be from Ishmael’s perspective, so we’ll call the speaker "the narrator." Just for kicks.
* The narrator takes some time out from the progress of the plot to review the details of cetology, a branch of marine science that studies marine mammals, such as whales, dolphins, and porpoise, in the scientific order Cetacea.
* Don't tune out. This chapter may look at first like the beginning of a boring Zoology textbook, but it’s really funny. We promise.
* Oh, and you might not want to use this to write a report about whales for your biology class. Don’t say we didn’t warn you.
* The narrator starts by quoting a few eminent scholars who have written about cetology. What all of them agree on is that studying whales is "involved" or "utter confusion" or "unfathomable" or "impenetrable" or "incomplete" (32.3-5). Good thing we’re going to get some solid scientific facts here.
* Of course, the narrator explains, there may not be any "real knowledge," but there are still plenty of books about whales!
* He lists a few dozen authors who have written about them, most of whom are also quoted in the "Extracts" section at the beginning of the novel.
* Only a few of these authors actually saw whales, and only one of them was a professional whaleman, Captain Scoresby. Scoresby knew a lot about the Greenland or right whale but not much about the sperm whale.
* The narrator claims that the sperm whale is the real king of whales.
* According to the narrator, there are two books that describe the sperm whale firsthand in scientific terms (by Beale and Bennett), but they’re pretty limited, so the sperm whale "lives not complete in any literature" (32.8).
* The narrator decides that, since nobody’s been able to put together a classification system or family tree of whales, he’ll have to do it himself. Still, he says he knows it will be a rough sketch—because what is he, a biologist? But he’ll try anyway.
* The narrator finds two main problems with making a classification system for whales:
* First, are whales fish, or what? The narrator knows that Linnaeus (an eighteenth-century Swedish botanist and zoologist who laid the foundations of the modern biological system of classification) said whales aren’t fish, because they’re warm-blooded and have lungs, whereas fish are cold-blooded and have gills.
* The narrator acknowledges Linnaeus’s point but, meh—he still decides that the whale is pretty much a fish anyway, à la Jonah. Good thing our narrator is a logical guy, eh?
* Second, how do we define "whale" as a specific category? The narrator decides to define "whale" as "a spouting fish with a horizontal tail" (32.14).
* But, the narrator assures us, that doesn’t mean he’s excluding anything that Nantucketers have called a whale before, even if it doesn’t fit his definition.
* Except, he says (in a footnote), he knows there are fish called pig-fish and sow-fish that some people call whales, and he excludes them. Make sense? Nah, it’s not supposed to.
* The narrator divides the whales into classification categories, which he calls "books" and "chapters." Hmm… whales are being treated as novels. Interesting, that, in a novel about a whale.
* The three "books" of whales are the "folio whale," the "octavo whale," and the "duodecimo whale." Flash History Lesson: This is another book joke, because folio, octavo, and duodecimo are three [**common nineteenth-century sizes of books**](http://www.trussel.com/books/booksize.htm). Each size is related to how many times you fold a large standard sheet of paper to make the pages. Folios are the largest, octavo are mid-sized, and duodecimo are tiny, so the narrator is just dividing up whales by their size, a pretty basic characteristic.
* Within "Book I," the "Folio Whales," the narrator includes six "Chapters" of whales, each of which is what we’d call a species. The six are: the Sperm Whale, the Right Whale, the Fin-Back, the Hump Back, the Razor Back, and the Sulphur Bottom.
* The Sperm Whale comes first (of course). According to the narrator, sperm whales are the biggest and the best whales around.
* The main thing the narrator wants to talk about here is why they’re called "sperm whales." We know you’ve been snickering into your hand about that one, and guess what: you should.
* We’re giving you a big literary-critical thumbs-up about the dirty joke here. Every time we see the phrase "sperm whale" in the novel, just imagine that Melville is digging his elbow into your ribs and saying "get it? sperm?"
* (Don’t even get us started on all the puns on "seamen.")
* The narrator explains how he thinks they came to be called sperm whales.
* Sperm whales produce a valuable oily substance called "spermaceti," and people thought that it was actually the semen of the Greenland or right whale, but it wasn’t.
* When they finally figured it out, people started calling the whale that spermaceti actually comes from the "sperm whale," and the name stuck.
* Anyway, spermaceti’s going to be pretty important later in the novel.
* The Right Whale is the first that people hunted, and from it we get whalebone and baleen and whale oil (not the same as spermaceti). Melville lumps together six or so different names for whales here, blithely claiming they’re all basically the same anyway and that the whole problem with naturalists is that they’re always dividing things up into too many categories. Wait… isn’t that what he was supposed to be doing here? Oh, well.
* Next comes the Fin-Back Whale, which has—are you ready for this?—a big fin on its back. We know you’re shocked. Oh, and it seems like a sinister whale version of Cain.
* Of course, the narrator admits that lots of different whales have fins on their backs, but he can’t be bothered to use superficial features like that to classify whales.
* It’s not the outsides of whales, their humps or fins or teeth or baleen or anything, that makes it possible to classify them.
* Is it their insides? Nope, that’s pretty much the same, too.
* They have to be classified in a bibliographical system, like books, because that’s the only thing that will work, says the narrator. (No, that is not supposed to make sense.)
* Next comes the Hump Back Whale, which isn’t the only whale with a hump on its back and doesn’t have very valuable oil, but is a cheerful playful sort of creature.
* Next is the razor back whale. Nobody knows anything about it, including the narrator.
* Last of the "folio whales" is the Sulphur Bottom Whale, which has a yellow belly and looks like it’s been scraping along the ceiling of hell.
* Now the narrator lists five kinds of "Octavo Whales," which are the Grampus, the Black Fish, the Narwhale, the Killer, and the Thrasher. (They sound like nicknames for pro-wrestlers, don’t they?)
* First comes the Grampus, which most people don’t call a whale, but some do. Seeing a grampus may mean that there’s a sperm whale nearby (hint hint).
* Next comes the Black Fish, which the narrator suggests should be called the Hyena Whale instead because there are lots of black fish. It can be a poor substitute for a sperm whale for hunters.
* Next is the Narwhale, which is sometimes called the "Unicorn Whale" because it has a long single sharp tusk on the left side. Nobody really knows what it uses this for, perhaps to rake up food, perhaps to break up ice. The narrator thinks it should use the tusk to turn the pages while it reads.
* Next is the Killer Whale, which our narrator says isn’t usually hunted and seems savage. The narrator objects to its name, saying that "we are all killers, on land and on sea" (32.35).
* Last of the "Octavo Whales" is the "Thrasher Whale," which supposedly swims on the back of other whales and uses its tail to whip them and make them move forward. Seriously?!
* The narrator lists three types of "Duodecimo Whales," which are all porpoises. The narrator says that they may not seem like whales because they’re so small, but he has to include them because they fit his definition of "a spouting fish with a tail."
* The first is the Huzza Porpoise, which the narrator himself named because it’s supposed to be a good omen. ("Huzza" is an older version of "hooray.") The Huzza Porpoise is sort of like a miniature sperm whale. Hey—can we get in on the whale-naming game? This seems fun.
* The next is the Algerine Porpoise, which is larger and savage.
* The last is the Mealy-Mouthed Porpoise, which is the largest one and looks like it just made a sneaky visit to its food dish.
* The narrator explains that he’s going to stop there and not talk about any of the other whales that he knows "by reputation, but not personally." He lists a few dozen of them.
* After all, he promised that his classification system would be incomplete, and he’s got to keep that promise.
* It’s like a cathedral that is so grand that it can’t be completed by the first architect. Thus, the narrator expresses the hope that he’ll never finish anything. (We just hope he finishes the novel.)

***Synopsis***:

“Cetology,” as Ishmael explains, is “the science of whales.” In this and subsequent science-centered chapters in the book, Ishmael attempts to classify whales scientifically. He includes quotations from various writings on the whale, adding that others might be able to revise this draft of a classification system. Rather than using the Linnaean classifications of family, genus, and species—which were already the standard in Melville’s time—Ishmael divides whales into different “chapters” of three distinct “books”: the Folio, Octavo, and Duodecimo.

***Critical Study:***Cetology is the study of whales, and the subject has been lengthily handled by numerous authors including Captain Scoresby, the best existing authority on the Greenland whale. There are only two books that pretend to put the living Sperm Whale as their subject and succeed at the task, by Bennett and by Beale, both surgeons to English whale ships. Ishmael finally defines a whale as a spouting fish with a horizontal tail, going back to the claim by Jonah that the whale is a fish. Ishmael discusses the differences between the various whales, noting each type and the characteristics of the respective types of whale.

Analysis:

Melville once again abandons the narrative of the novel to adopt a different stylistic tone for Moby Dick. The novel now shifts to a scientific discourse on the study of whales in an attempt to elucidate their particular characteristics. The effect of this description of cetology, however, has an opposite effect; instead of giving a clear indication of the Sperm Whale, the chapter on cetology contributes to the idea that the sperm whale is something difficult to study and define. This lends credence to more symbolic definitions of the white whale that is the novel's title character; since it is more difficult to define the whale in scientific terms, the whale thus lends itself to more vague and creative symbolism.

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

***Summary Part 1:***

[**Ishmael**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) attempts to lay out for the reader a systematic overview of the kinds of whales, and the divisions into which whales might be separated. Ishmael notes that, though a great many writers from Biblical times onward have mentioned whales or leviathans in their texts, very few have a scientific understanding of whales, and even fewer know much about the sperm whale, the “king of the seas” and the whale being hunted by the Pequod. On the topic of whether a whale is a fish, Ishmael cites a good deal of scholarship debating the issue, but concludes that whales ought to be defined as “spouting, horizontal-tailed fishes with lungs and warm blood.”

***Analysis Part 1:***

A famous chapter in the novel, one often referenced when critics speak of its “contemporary” or “postmodern” nature. Here, Ishmael attempts to help himself and the reader to understand whales through scientific means of observation and classification. And yet while this effort is elucidating it also highlights, purposely, that scientific knowledge can't explain all, or provide all understanding. Whales remain mysteries despite what is scientifically known about them, and thus they serve as a metaphor for nature and the world, for the spirit that men sense but *can't* define.

***Summary Part 2:***[**Ishmael**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) divides the whales as though they are books. Book 1, chapter 1 is the sperm whale, the “spermaceti,” the most majestic and most valuable (for its oil). Book 1, Chapter 2 is the right whale, which is also hunted like the sperm whale, but which produces an “inferior oil.” Book 1, Chapter 3 is the fin-back whale, a “solitary” whale apparently marked, like Cain in the Bible, and separated from its fellow whales, swimming mostly alone. Ishmael also identifies the humpback, the razor-back, and the sulphur-bottom whales, although he states that he knows little about them, other than the basic features of their appearance, and their lack of oil-value.

***Analysis Part 2:***

The right whale serves as an interesting foil to the sperm whale, which, like Ahab, Ishmael considers to be the most noble on the seas, something akin to whale royalty. The right whale, on the other hand, is less noble, because it does not hunt for its food, but rather skims the water for small organisms. The right whale is also not as “majestic” when it swims, and its head and body cannot be used for the harvesting of the most useful of whale products—sperm oil.

***Summary Part 3:***Book 2 consists of the smaller whales—the grampus, the black-fish, and the narwhal. Many scholars debate whether or not these specimens are actual whales, and Ishmael states that the narwhal is notable for its tusk, whose purpose is debated among scientists. Ishmael wonders if the narwhal isn’t singled out for its resemblance to the unicorn, which seems to inspire in men a kind of romantic sentiment. Ishmael rounds out Book 2 by discussing the killer whale briefly, stating that these whales tend not be hunted by Nantucketers.

***Analysis Part 3:***

Other whales might have a kind of scientific value—or, in the case of narwhals, a literary one—but they, too, lack the excitement of the sperm whale, perhaps because they do not produce oil, and perhaps because they do not put up nearly as much of a fight when caught. Indeed, the reader might wonder whether sperm whales aren’t valued because of the difficulty men have in hunting them.

***Summary Part 4:***The final book, Book 3, consists of what Ishmael calls porpoises. Ishmael notably has a harder time differentiating among the porpoises, and among other kinds of “pseudo-whales.” Ishmael then closes this chapter by saying that cetology, as a science (the study of whales) has much to be added to it, and that that branch of science, much like this narrative Ishmael is writing, is “but a draft—nay, but the draft of a draft.”

***Analysis Part 4:***

A very important moment in the novel. That the novel itself might be a “draft”—an attempt to describe a subject that is too vast, too complex for one book—is another “postmodern” or contemporary-seeming idea. Melville clearly viewed his novelistic enterprise as Ishmael does, here—one that is impossible to fully complete. It also captures the idea of scientific and all knowledge, that it is some thing that is always growing, always revising and rewriting itself.