***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 33 – Specksynder***

***Summary:***

* The narrator describes some of the unusual aspects of the hierarchy on board whaling ships.
* In the past, Dutch whaling ships had two commanders, a captain who ran the ship itself, and a "specksynder" who was like a chief harpooneer.
* The importance of the harpooneers on a whaling voyage has always meant that there was an "extra" class of people on a whaling ship (as compared to other ships).
* Harpooneers usually get living quarters with the officers, because where you live on the ship is the main way of distinguishing officers from crew.
* Even though whaling ships usually go on long voyages and they feel a little bit more democratic because everyone’s in it together to make a profit, discipline usually isn’t relaxed. Captains are usually proud and distant.
* Captain Ahab doesn’t require anything harsher than strict obedience (he doesn’t make people take off their shoes before stepping on the quarter-deck, like some captains), but he’s still terrifying and has complete authority.
* It’s also obvious, the narrator says, that sometimes Ahab abuses the forms and ceremonies allowed to captains for his own devious ends. After all, forms and ceremonies can even make idiot kings like Russia’s Czar Nicholas I into authority figures.
* Ahab, of course, isn’t a king, just a Nantucket whaling captain, and so most of his grandeur has to come from something less concrete.

***Synopsis***:

“The Specksynder” resembles the previous chapter, but it analyzes the whaling industry rather than whales. Beginning with trivia about the changing role of the specksynder (literally, “fat-cutter”), who used to be chief harpooner and captain, Ishmael moves on to a discussion of onboard leadership styles. He notes that the dependence of whalers upon one another for successful hunting and therefore wages begets its own discipline, and that a whaling ship is less hierarchical than other vessels. Nevertheless, many captains make a great show of their rank. Ahab doesn’t flaunt his superiority, although he can be a tyrant. In fact, Ishmael admits that it can be hard to see exactly what is remarkable about Ahab: one must “dive . . . for [it] in the deep.”

***Critical Study:***Chapter Thirty-Three: The Specksynder:

In the days of the Dutch Fishery, the Chief Harpooner or Specksynder reigned supreme. In the American Fishery is not only an important officer in the boat, but under certain circumstances the commander of the ship's deck. Captain Ahab tends to mask himself behind the forms and usages of the sea, for he has an intellectual superiority that can manifest itself in irresistible dictatorship. Ahab moves among his crew in all his "Nantucket grimness and shagginess."

Analysis:

In this chapter, Melville contributes additional information concerning the operations of the whaling ship and its hierarchy, framing the role of the harpooner or Specksynder in comparison with the rest of the crew. More importantly, Melville continues to elucidate the character of Ahab as not only an imposing and obsessive man, but a person whose intellectual capacity lends itself to a strong sense of dictatorship and control. It is these qualities that will become significant once the conflict with Moby Dick comes to prominence as the novel progresses.

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

***Summary Part 1:***

[**Ishmael**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) begins this short chapter by stating that whale-boats are different from other ships, in that they used to have two head officers—a captain and a specksnyder, or chief harpooneer. This office is now collapsed into that of the captain, but Ishmael points to the position of the specksnyder as an indication of the importance of the “harpooneer class” on a ship, and the centrality of the actual lancing of whales to the whaler’s life. Ishmael then discusses, briefly, the nature of [**Ahab’s**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ahab) particular grandeur. He is clearly a captain who delights in his “sultanism,” or his dictatorship of the vessel. But Ishmael notes that this dictatorship does not manifest itself outwardly, in bright, fancy clothing, or in a noble bearing. Rather, Ishmael hints that Ahab will demonstrate his harshness, cruelty, and ultimately royal nature only later on, when the fight with the whale commences.

***Analysis Part 1:***

The comparison of Ahab to a “sultan” is an intriguing one. For Ahab’s crew, the “tiger crew” that accompanies him on the whale-boat, is comprised entirely of men from Asia, and there is, indeed, a certain “orientalism” Ishmael associates with the captain of the vessel. Perhaps this has to do with the central mystery of Ahab—the fact that no one can explain why Ahab is so desirous of killing Moby Dick, above all other whales. For the east was, to people in Ishmael’s time, a place of strange passions, of intense desires, and of mysteries that might not necessarily be sensible to men of “reason,” in the west. The title also captures that the mysteries of Ahab give him a power over the ship and the men on it—that he rules completely.