***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 34 – The Cabin Table***

***Summary:***

* We return to your regularly-scheduled plot. It’s noon on board ship and Ahab has been using the sun to measure the ship’s position.
* Dough-Boy, the steward, announces that it’s time for dinner (the large mid-day meal, basically a big lunch).
* Ahab waits for a little bit, announces dinner to Starbuck, and heads into the cabin.
* Starbuck waits for Ahab to sit down, announces dinner to Stubb, and heads into the cabin.
* Stubb waits for Starbuck to sit down, announces dinner to Flask, and heads into the cabin.
* (It’s a comedy routine waiting to happen.)
* Flask silently does a silly dance in front of the sailors as he heads into the cabin, but the narrator somehow knows that, before the other mates and the captain catch him in his dancing, he’s changed his posture into a slavish bow.
* The narrator describes that officers who are bold on deck will generally be submissive at dinner with the captain. He thinks it’s a combination of the captain’s authority on board ship and the host’s authority at the dinner table.
* Ahab presiding at his table is like a sea-lion with its cubs. He carves the meat and serves each mate silently.
* Ahab’s never announced a rule that the officers can’t talk or help themselves, but they still don’t, and the whole meal happens without a word spoken.
* These meals are worst for Flask: he doesn’t get enough or anything very nice to eat, partly because he feels like he can’t help himself, partly because he has to come in last and leave first. Flask admits in private that he’s been hungry ever since he became an officer, and that he wishes he could be an ordinary sailor again so that he could eat a normal meal.
* After the captain and three mates eat, the harpooneers get to have their dinner at the cabin-table. Their meal is much livelier: even their chewing is loud, they eat huge amounts, and Tashtego throws a fork like a harpoon at Dough-Boy if he doesn’t work fast enough to keep them fed.
* Between the silent, sinister Ahab and the harpooneers who keep threatening to scalp him, Dough-Boy leads a pretty anxious life.
* The harpooneers supposedly live in the cabin with the captain and mates, but in reality they just enter it to eat or sleep a little, and spend most of their time outside it.
* Ahab mostly keeps the cabin to himself, but he’s not very pleasant company, so it doesn’t matter much.

***Synopsis***:

This chapter shows the ship’s officers at dinner. Meals are a rigid affair over which Ahab presides: no one talks, and a strict order of service is followed. After the officers finish eating, the table is relaid for the harpooners, who eat heartily, intimidating the cook with their voraciousness. The cabin is not a comfortable place for anyone, as it is Ahab’s territory and Ahab is “inaccessible,” “an alien.”

***Critical Study:***

[Ishmael](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Ishmael) takes a break from the story to talk about cetology, the study of whales, explaining difficulties in classifying the creatures and in studying them up close. He rejects the idea that a whale is not a fish, and defines a whale as "a spouting fish with a horizontal tail." Then he explains in great detail his own system for classifying whales. Next, in Chapter 33 he explains the authority structure on a whaling ship. Unlike other ships, whaling ships have an officer known as the specksnyder, who is the chief harpooner. As [Captain Ahab](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Captain_Ahab) is the ultimate authority on ship, he expects complete obedience.

Going back to the plot of the novel in Chapter 34, noon means it is dinnertime on the ship, and Ahab and his mates go to eat. Ishmael remarks that the officers seem bold while on deck, but at dinner they are more humble toward the captain, who sits at the head of the table and serves them, one by one, in silence. After Ahab and his mates eat, the harpooners take their places at the table and also have their dinner.

At times in the novel, [Ishmael](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Ishmael)'s narrative follows some scientific or technical tangent rather than the action of the plot. It is important to look for the threads that tie these chapters to the main events of the story. Sometimes they provide an introduction to or additional information about plot events, or they develop ideas and themes that appear again and again in the novel. For example, in this section Ishmael uses a discussion of cetology to introduce the idea that those who work with whales up close are well equipped to have opinions on them scientifically, and are thus a class of men set apart from others. This idea that whalemen are special leads into a discussion of how the hierarchy on whaling ships is different from that on other ships. Both Chapters 32 and 33 focus on the exceptional quality of whalemen and how they differ from those who observe or experience whales from afar.

The discussion of the hierarchical nature of authority on board—and in particular, the captain's unquestioned authority—leads into a fascinating illustration of this: the noon meal at which the relationship between Ahab and his officers is clearly displayed. The cook ritualistically announces the meal, and Ahab ritualistically informs his first mate, who informs the second mate, who informs the third mate. At dinner, gloomy Ahab presides over a silent table of obedient and humble mates. It is only after these higher-ranked officers have finished eating that the lower-ranked officers, the harpooners, are allowed to sit and eat.

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

***Summary Part 1:***

[Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) then notes, briefly, the nature of [Ahab’s](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ahab) dining. Ahab eats his dinner each nigh with the three mates, and they sit at an ivory (whalebone) table over which Ahab presides, like the head of a family. [Starbuck](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/starbuck) gets the largest portion of the three mates, then [Stubb](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters), then [Flask](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters), and Flask must leave the table first to tend to his duties back on deck—Stubb and then Starbuck follow him.

***Analysis Part 1:***

Division of life on a whale ship, like similar divisions in the military, break down along lines of “class” or status. Here, the officers of the ship, like the officers in the military, tend to associate with one another, and not with the crew, or troops. Ahab seems to emphasize this hierarchy, and his own place at its top, more than most.

***Summary Part 2:***  
[Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) also describes, briefly, the meals eaten by the three harpooneers—[Queequeg](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/queequeg), [Tashtego](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters), and [Daggoo](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters)—whose lip-smacking and “barbaric” manners tend to scare the dough-boy, or cook, on the ship. Ishmael notes that, although in some ships, the captain makes the officers and the harpooneers feel comfortable lounging and talking in the captain’s quarters, [Ahab](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ahab) engenders no such camaraderie, but instead keeps mostly to himself before and after meal times.

***Analysis Part 2***

The harpooneers, for their part, act as something like “non-commissioned officers,” or officers of a middle tier, between the ship’s captain and mates, on the one hand, and the crew, on the other. The “strange” habits of the “savage” harpooneers (described by Ishmael in a manner that would now be considered offensive) are often viewed as impenetrable and mysterious by others on the vessel. Ahab is again notable for how he sets himself apart.