***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 35 – The Mast-Head***

***Summary:***

* We move back to Ishmael’s perspective. Ishmael’s first experience as lookout (for whales or for anything else) on the mast-head comes during the nice weather further south.
* Most American whaling ships, Ishmael explains, man the mast-heads from the time they leave port until every hold, jar, and bottle is full of whale.
* Ishmael compares standing on the mast-head to standing on top of a renowned monument and to famous heroes occupying pillars—e.g., the pyramids, which he suggests were used for astronomy; the pillar-dwelling hermit St. Stylites; and generals and heroes like Napoleon, George Washington, and Admiral Nelson, who are now statues overlooking wide expanses from their pillars.
* Ishmael excuses his comparison between land and sea pillars by describing whalemen's lookout towers on land that let ships know when it’s safe to head out.
* Ishmael describes a shift on top of the mast-head as incredibly relaxing—you’re just hanging out a few hundred feet in the air, not reading any disturbing news, not getting anxious about anything, just feeling yourself move across the sea. You don’t even wonder about dinner, because everyone has the same thing all the time.
* Of course, the problem is that there isn’t anything comfortable to stand or sit on; usually you’re perched on the cross-trees, two thin pieces of wood nailed to the mast, and you’re pretty cold.
* On Greenland whalers, the lookouts have crow’s-nests, which are little tent or pulpit sort of things to sit in that hold your stuff and protect you a little from the weather, but they don’t have these on the southern whaling ships.
* Ishmael thinks the best part of the crow’s-nest would be the ability to keep a flask of liquor in it.
* Ishmael finds being on mast-head duty relaxing, but that’s mostly because he spends more time thinking up there and less time worrying about the things he supposed to be looking for.
* He advises people who own whaling ships not to hire young men who look romantic or philosophic, because they’ll be terrible lookouts.
* These types of young men will be more capable of feeling their identities dissolve into the natural world in a kind of ecstatic spiritual experience than they will to spot the whales they’ve been hired to find.
* One problem with this transcendent encounter between man and nature? Is that this feeling might make a guy forget to hold on to the mast, and he could fall into the sea and drown.

***Synopsis***:

Ishmael describes his first post on the masthead (the top of the ship’s masts) watching for whales. He provides a history of mastheads and their role on whaling ships. He proceeds to discuss statues, hermits, and ancient Egyptians as prior “mast-head standers.” The masthead is a place where whalers spend a great deal of time, and Ishmael laments its lack of comforts: on a South Seas ship, the masthead offers only two small pegs upon which to stand. He compares this setup to that of other ships, which have miniature cabins atop the masts. Ishmael admits that he himself daydreams too much to keep a good watch, and he warns captains against hiring “romantic, melancholy, and absent-minded young men,” who are likely to miss whales in the vicinity.

***Critical Study(Ch34-35):***

This chapter includes an interesting contrast of the eating habits of the higher classed officers and the harpooners. The solemn, tense dinner with Ahab contrasts greatly with the laid-back attitude of the harpooners. The men who eat with Ahab are on edge; there is no talking, joking or laughing. In fact, one of the officers is not even allowed to eat his fill. The harpooners, on the other hand, enjoy their meal and act naturally, although rudely. This chapter is one in which Melville makes a definite statement about the different classes of people on the ship. While the officers appear to have clout, their circumstances are sometimes not as comfortable as those who fill more common roles.

In the following chapter, it is interesting that Ishmael warns those hiring a crew for a whaling vessel against hiring pensive, thoughtful men to stand watch. This statement is especially ironic since Ishmael appears to be one of these pensive men himself. Also in this chapter, the reader gets the feeling that Ishmael is not telling his story in the exact chronological order it happened. Although this chapter is placed far into the voyage, at least several months, you get the feeling it must have actually occurred prior and Ishmael is not actually serving his first watch in the mast three or four months into his journey. This is one example of the non-congruent view of time Melville gives in his book, deliberately throwing the reader off from knowing exactly the order in which the recorded events occurred.

***Analysis(Ch 32-35):***

In one of many considerations of cetology (the study of whales), Ishmael tells us of various types of leviathan, of which he values the sperm whale most highly. His attention then shifts to life aboard ship as he discusses the chain of command and some of the ways in which this hierarchy is demonstrated in daily life. The narrator considers the beauties and dangers of serving watch at the masthead.

Melville breaks the intensity of Ahab's introduction with these informative chapters in which Ishmael considers types of whales as well as life aboard ship.

Ishmael's discussion of the hierarchy of whales demonstrates his pride in, and the importance he places on, whaling. He has deepest admiration for the sperm whale. It is, he says, the largest denizen of the globe and the most formidable to encounter, earning any experienced whaler's respect. More important to the whaling business, it is also the most valuable type of whale because it is the leading source of spermaceti, a white, wax-like substance taken from the oil in the head and used to make cosmetics, ointments, and candles. To Ishmael, the sperm whale is a noble creature, adding significance to the business of whaling but also to Ahab's quest, of which we are just beginning to be informed.

A whaling vessel also has a kind of hierarchy, a chain of command that is essential to discipline and efficiency. Its effect can be seen in the daily lives of the men aboard. The crew on a whaler is quartered at the front of the vessel; the captain, mates, and harpooners sleep at the back of the ship. Of special interest is the respect shown the harpooners. Their backgrounds may be primitive, as is the case on this voyage, but they are treated like a class of officers because of the importance of their unique skills. In the old days, two hundred years before our story, authority aboard Dutch whalers was divided between the regular naval captain and a "Specksynder" — literally, a "Fat-Cutter," but in fact the chief harpooner who controlled the whale hunt. While this office no longer exists in the industry of Ishmael's time, dominated by Americans, harpooners are quartered with the officers, eat at the captain's table after the other officers have finished, and receive considerable respect.

Whaling is dangerous for all aboard, especially those posted to watch for whales in the masthead, the highest point on the ship. While the view can be awe-inspiring on a beautiful day, merely climbing to the masthead is dangerous. Nor is this perch on a southern whaler, such as the Pequod, a protected "crow's nest" as one might find on a ship in northern waters. It is an open perch with bars for holding on but no protection. When rough weather hits, the hapless sailor on masthead watch must fend for himself.

Glossary

penem . . . lactantem; ex lege . . . meritoque Latin, "a penis that enters the female that suckles from breasts; from the law of nature with justice and merit." The narrator quotes this scholarly definition of a mammal for the purpose of ironic humor. He thinks a whale is a fish either way.

abridged condensed, shortened but keeping the main contents.

hustings a deliberative assembly; here, politics, a political campaign.

saline salty.

progeny descendants, offspring.

abstemious characterized by abstinence.

buckler a small, round shield held by hand or worn on the arm.

***Critical Analysis:***In most American whalemen the mast-heads are manned almost simultaneously with the vessel's leaving her port. There is a long history of mast-heads dating back to the Egyptians. Obed of Nantucket tells that in the early times of whale fishery, before ships were regularly launched in pursuit of game, people of Nantucket erected spars along the sea-coast as lookouts, but this custom has now become obsolete. There are unfortunate whale ships unprovided with crow's nests, the little tents or pulpits that protect the whaler from inclement weather.

This chapter is yet another instance in which Melville abandons the narrative to employ a different style of writing. He once again returns to a historical view of whaling, citing developments in the industry and changes to it.

## *Notes:*

[Ishmael](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Ishmael) is about to take his first turn at the masthead, looking constantly at the sea for signs of whales. He considers how their masthead is different from a "crow's nest" and how "young philosophers" might not do a diligent job of sighting the whales. He admits that it is difficult to maintain your focus on watching for whales when you are thinking about other things.

This chapter includes a little humor in that [Ishmael](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Ishmael) acknowledges it is hard to pay attention to your job when you're constantly getting caught up in philosophical thoughts. Because Ishmael's own story is a fabric of tangential thoughts, philosophies, and musings interwoven with plot, he seems to be talking about himself here.

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

***Summary Part 1:***

[Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) describes the duty of sitting atop the mast-head, or the tip of each long spar extending upward from the deck of the Pequod. Ishmael notes, half-comically, that “mast-head-standing” has a long history: the Babylonians did something similar when they built the tower of Babel, and stone carvings of Napoleon, Admiral Nelson, and George Washington sit atop tall columns in the Western world and America. But Ishmael wishes to describe in greater detail the watch sailors must serve while sitting atop the masts.

***Analysis Part 1:***

As in other parts of the novel, Ishmael here does not seek only to describe the activity of sitting on the mast. Instead, he wishes to situate that activity within a historical context that describes, over time, how men have chosen to sit atop high things and look down upon the world. Fittingly, as his first example, Ishmael takes the Tower of Babel, an attempt by man, in Biblical times, to reach the sky—and which resulted in God striking down the tower as an overreach by men, and ensure that such an effort could never be done again by making men speak different languages. Looked at that way, the Babel story led to the diversity on the Pequod. Looked at another way, the story hints at Ahab's own possible overreach in his monomaniacal quest.

***Summary Part 2:***  
[Ishmael](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ishmael) says that sailors on the Pequod and similar vessels sit atop the mast for two-hour shifts while it is light out. The top of whaling vessels tends not to have crow’s nests, or small seating areas, but rather have only two slats of wood upon which the sailor is to balance, either seated or standing. Ishmael says that the purpose of the mast-head watch is to spot whales, but that many young men, lulled into calming meditation by the serenity of the South Seas, think only of their own happiness and contentment, and never spot whales at all. Ishmael considers this a natural outcome of the beauty of the scene from the mast-head, although he notes that this phenomenon often angers harpooneers, who are hoping to hunt and kill whales.

***Analysis Part 2***

Sitting atop the mast has two purposes in the novel. The first, as here, is inherently practical—one has the best view from this vantage, and therefore one might spot whales from here with great efficiency. Second, the top of the mast-head has a kind of philosophical importance on a whale-ship, as here, men are alone, able to view the sea in all its vastness. There are few places on a ship where a man can be completely alone with his thoughts, but the mast-head is one of those places. And in this high place of beauty and contemplation, men lose themselves.