***Moby Dick***

***Chapter 36 – The Quarter-Deck***

***Summary:***

* A short time after the pipe-throwing incident (Chapter 30), Ahab comes onto the deck one morning after breakfast and starts pacing.
* Even the planks that don’t have special holes for his bone leg have dents in them from all his pacing, and the dents seem especially deep today.
* Then Ahab shuts himself up in his cabin and paces some more.
* Eventually he comes out and orders Starbuck to send everyone aft. The whole ship’s crew, even the lookouts, gather together.
* Ahab keeps pacing. The crew start to wonder if they’re just there to watch him pace.
* Ahab suddenly asks everyone basic questions about whaling, and they answer that when you see a whale you call out, lower the boats, and go after him, and your motto is "a dead whale or a stove [wrecked] boat" (36.16).
* Ahab pulls out a gold Spanish doubloon, shows it to everyone, and announces that whichever lookout finds "a white-headed whale with a wrinkled brow and a crooked jaw" that also has "three holes punctured in his starboard fluke" will get the doubloon (36.21).
* Symbolism Alert: Ahab nails the doubloon to the mast.
* The harpooneers, Queequeg, Tashtego, and Daggoo, each react strangely to Ahab’s description of the white whale. Tashtego says it must be the whale some people call Moby Dick. At last! The title character gets mentioned!
* Each of the harpooneers has seen Moby Dick, and they each know a little about him—how his spout looks, how he moves his tail, and how many different harpoons he has in him already.
* Starbuck has also heard of Moby Dick—and he’s heard that Moby Dick is the whale that took off Ahab’s leg.
* Ahab admits this and, getting really worked up, announces that he’s going to chase the whale everywhere, even to hell, in order to get revenge on it.
* Everyone cheers and Ahab orders drinks for everyone, but Starbuck spoils the party by objecting. He says he came on the voyage to hunt whales and make money, not to get revenge for Captain Ahab. He’ll hunt Moby Dick if they happen to come across him, but he’s not going on some weird quest.
* Ahab offers to pay Starbuck out of his own pocket to hunt the whale. Starbuck still objects and says that it’s blasphemous to be angry at a dumb animal.
* Ahab argues that all things in the world are like "pasteboard masks" and that there’s some conscious thing behind them all.
* In striking at the whale he is going to "strike through the mask" at whatever it was that destroyed his leg, and it doesn’t matter to him whether the whale was the thing itself or just the mask (36.39).
* Ahab realizes that he’s disturbing Starbuck and starts to speak more calmly. He argues that Starbuck is here to hunt whales anyway, so why not this one? After all, everyone else in the crew is happy to hunt Moby Dick.
* For some reason, Starbuck gives in to Ahab. (See Chapter 26, which foreshadows this weakness in Starbuck’s courage.)
* For a moment, there are sinister omens everywhere: Starbuck prays, the wind dies down, there’s a strange laugh from below, and so on. Then it all passes away.
* Ahab takes a pewter mug full of grog and arranges the harpooneers in a line standing across from him and holding their harpoons; the mates stand beside him holding their lances. The crew stands around them all in a circle.
* Ahab sends the mug around to the crew for everyone to drink; they refill the cup each time it gets empty.
* Next, Ahab makes the mates cross their lances in front of him, and he grasps them where they cross. Then he suddenly pulls at them in a strange way. Stubb and Flask look away and Starbuck looks down.
* Ahab says that it’s probably for the best that the three mates failed to absorb his electric anger, because then he might have lost it himself.
* Now Ahab orders the harpooneers to cut the ropes that hold the iron heads of their harpoons to the handles. Each harpooneer hands the head of his harpoon to the mate that he works with. The mates, as cupbearers, turn the heads over and use the socket ends as cups, which Ahab fills with grog. Then they give these cups back to the harpooneers, who drink "Death to Moby Dick!" (36.49)
* Everyone has one more drink, and they disperse.
* Starbuck turns pale and shivers.

***Synopsis***:

Captain Ahab paces the deck; a deck which Ishmael indicates already bears many dents left by the tip of Ahab's ivory leg. It seems to Ishmael the Captain's forehead is also dented and wrinkled with the heaviness of the thoughts within him as well as the agony of not sleeping. Near the end of the day, Ahab stops his pacing, steadies himself in an auger hole and orders Starbuck to call the entire crew to the deck where he stands. As all the men are gathered, Ahab resumes his pacing and questions the men about what they are to do when they see a whale. Ahab shows excited approval when they answer each question to his liking.

Next, Ahab shows the men a Spanish ounce of gold, which he nails to the main mast. This ounce, he says will be a prize to the man who first spots the white whale Moby Dick. He then tells the men of his mission to search the seas to their ends and ultimately hunt down and kill Moby Dick, a mission that Starbuck thinks is bound only in vengeance. Starbuck tries to reason with Ahab and explains to him that vengeance against a whale who acted only out of instinct is useless and will profit little or nothing.

Ahab, however, points out to Starbuck that the entire rest of the crew is itching to search for the whale and Starbuck is outnumbered. Ahab then has a keg of ale passed among the men for them to drink. He then requests the harpooners cross their harpoons in an old sea custom. Ahab takes hold of the point where all three harpoons cross. Ahab then has the harpooners stand with their harpoons in front of them, fills the sockets with the liquor and has them drink again.

This chapter is a turning point in the entire novel. It is here that the reader learns the true intent of Ahab's heart and how far he will go to see Moby Dick put to death. Like an enthusiastic coach at a football game, Ahab stirs the crew to a frenzied excitement in catching the whale. He first entices them with money, then with the thrill of the chase. Ahab also uses the old sea rituals as a way to unify and draw the men together in their mission.

Only Starbuck seems to retain his composure and realize what a useless feat the idea of chasing only Moby Dick is when the crew's real mission is to chase all whales, not just one. He speaks up against Ahab's plan, but none of the crew will back him. Ahab uses this lack of backing against Starbuck. As captain, Ahab generally has the power to command the crew to do whatever his wishes as long as the majority of the crew does not rise up against him. With only one man openly opposed to his plan, Ahab has little to worry about.

At the end of the chapter, Melville gives us a hint of foreshadowing in the form of a hollow laugh that is heard coming from the hold of the boat. Also, as Ahab makes his announcement, the winds die down for a moment and the sails of the ship deflate. This makes it seem as if even the winds and the ship recognize the doom and misfortune in store for the ship and its crew.

***Critical Study:***

Ahab finally makes an official appearance before the men. First, he stirs the crew by calling out simple questions about their mission, to which they respond in unison. He then presents a Spanish gold doubloon, proclaiming, “Whosoever of ye raises me a white-headed whale with a wrinkled brow and a crooked jaw . . . he shall have this gold ounce, my boys!” The men cheer, and the harpooners ask if it is Moby Dick that Ahab seeks. Ahab then confesses, in response to Starbuck’s query, that it was indeed Moby Dick who stripped him of his leg, and he announces his quest to hunt the whale down. The men shout together that they will hunt with Ahab, though Starbuck protests that he “came here to hunt whales, not [his] commander’s vengeance.” Ahab commences a ritual that binds the crew together: he orders all of his men to drink from one flagon that gets passed around. Telling the harpooners to cross their lances before him, Ahab grasps the weapons and anoints Queequeg, Tashtego, and Daggoo “my three pagan kinsmen there—yon three most honorable gentlemen and noble men.” He then makes them take the iron off of the harpoons to use as drinking goblets. They all drink together as Ahab proclaims, “God hunt us all, if we do not hunt Moby Dick to his death!”

***Analysis:***

A few days after the incident with his pipe, Ahab spends a restless day in his cabin or pacing the quarter-deck. Near the end of the day, he issues an unusual order: The entire crew, even the masthead watch, is to assemble before him. Ahab briefly discusses procedure for announcing the sighting of a whale and offers a Spanish ounce of gold to the first man to spot the White Whale. He enlists the crew's support in a mission to kill Moby Dick; only Starbuck objects. Ahab and the crew celebrate.

In one of the most significant chapters in the novel, Melville employs a dramatic technique — complete with brief stage directions, dialogue, and rousing speech, as well as narrative intervention. This is one of several dramatized chapters in the novel. The method is especially effective here because it allows the reader to see how charismatic and forceful Ahab can be as a leader and speaker.

As the day wears on, it is clear to Stubb that something important is stirring in Ahab. The second mate tells Flask that "the chick that's in him [Ahab] pecks the shell." This is the time that Ahab chooses to announce his true intentions to the crew and attempt to persuade the men to join him in a singular effort to hunt down the White Whale. Like a speaker at a political rally, Ahab first unifies the group by asking a series of emotionally charged questions that call for unified responses: What do you do when you spot a whale? What do you do next? What tune do you pull to in pursuit? The men are increasingly excited, almost as if they are in the blood lust of a real hunt. Ahab then employs his prop, a Spanish gold ounce, offered to the man who first sees ("raises") the White Whale. He dramatically holds up the coin to the declining sun and nails it to the mainmast.

The harpooners are the first to recognize the whale's description — the white head, wrinkled brow, crooked jaw, three holes in the starboard fluke — as that of Moby Dick. Their enthusiastic confirmations, and the revelation that Moby Dick took off the captain's leg, lead Ahab into an emotional appeal to the crew to join him in chasing the whale "over all sides of earth, till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out." The men shout their enthusiastic approval. The only abstention is from Starbuck who wants to stick to the business of accumulating whale oil and thinks it "blasphemous" to seek revenge on a "dumb brute — that simply smote thee from blindest instinct!" Ahab responds that he would "strike the sun if it insulted me." This scene clarifies the primary difference between Starbuck and Ahab: Starbuck attributes no meaning to how and why things happen; Ahab interprets meaning in everything.

Scholars dispute whether Ahab considers Moby Dick to be a representative of evil or whether the captain's vanity is so great that he wants to take on the structure of nature, even God himself. Is the whale evil, or is the evil in Ahab? The captain seems half-mad as he rants about attacking the "inscrutable thing" behind the "mask," the force behind the façade that is the whale. To understand Ahab's obsession, we must try to understand what he really wants to kill. Is it the whale or a power he sees behind the whale? These are questions to consider as the novel progresses. A convincing argument can be made that Ahab wants to be God and is offended that he should have to bear the insult of any authority beyond himself. The "inscrutable thing" dares to limit Ahab's role in the world. Ahab thinks that he is filled with a superhuman power, an interior electricity that would kill mere mortals. As he offers wine to the three harpooners, ceremonially celebrating a commitment to a unified cause, the scene has the impact of a diabolical black mass. Ahab is a powerful man, charismatic, obsessed, even mad, and he has all but one of the crew under his control.

Glossary

perdition damnation, Hell.

inscrutable obscure, mysterious, enigmatic.

tacit unspoken.

***Critical Analysis:***Ahab ascends the cabin-gangway to the deck and paces as usual; his pacing has made dents that look deeper and deeper. Stubb remarks to Flask that "the chick that's in him pecks the shell. 'Twill soon be out." Ahab asks the men what they will do when they see a whale, as if building up their energy for the task at hand. He tells the crew that whichever one raises Ahab a white-headed whale with a wrinkled brow and a crooked jaw will have an ounce of gold. Tashtego asks Ahab if this white whale is the one called Moby Dick. Starbuck asks Ahab if it was Moby Dick who took Ahab's leg, and Ahab admits as such. Stubb whispers that Moby Dick smites Ahab's chest, and that "it rings most vast, but hollow." Starbuck tells Ahab that his obsession with Moby Dick is madness. Ahab claims that all things are but masks but in each event there is some unknown reasoning behind that mask, and man must strike through this mask. For Ahab, the white whale is that mask. He says that "that inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate" and "truth has no confines."

It is in this chapter that [Herman Melville](https://www.gradesaver.com/author/herman-melville) first mentions the titular character of the novel, the white Sperm Whale responsible for the loss of Ahab's leg. Body parts are a prevalent motif throughout this chapter, with the mention of Ahab's lost leg and the reference to Stubb about how Ahab's chest "rings most vast, but hollow." This lends credence to the idea that Moby Dick afflicts Ahab in a very personal way, striking at not only his leg but his mind and his heart. Even at this first mention of Moby Dick, Melville indicates that Ahab's obsession with the whale is a sign of madness.

For Ahab, the defeat of Moby Dick will represent a personal redemption and a means of achieving clarity and peace. Claiming that Moby Dick is "chiefly what I hate" gives the whale greater significance for Ahab, who finds that the whale represents all of the mysteries of his life. This creates an interesting duality; the quest to find Moby Dick is therefore both an external conflict between Ahab and the whale as well as an internal conflict within Ahab for a sense of peace and happiness.

*Notes:*

One morning after breakfast, [Captain Ahab](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Captain_Ahab) paces, lost in thought. The rest of the day, he shuts himself in his cabin at intervals, pacing whenever he is on deck. Near the end of the day, he calls for the entire ship's company to be assembled. He takes a Spanish gold piece and tells the men that whoever raises the White Whale will have it. Then the gold is nailed to the mast. The harpooners recognize this "White Whale" as "[Moby Dick](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Moby_Dick)," and Ahab is glad to hear that they already know of him. [Starbuck](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Starbuck) asks if it wasn't Moby Dick who took off Ahab's leg, and Ahab confirms this to be true. Starbuck doesn't like the idea of hunting for vengeance—he wants to hunt whales, not a particular whale. Ahab has the men drink grog (rum mixed with water) in a ritualistic way, and has them swear, "Death to Moby Dick!"

This chapter is a turning point in the novel, as [Captain Ahab](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Captain_Ahab)'s true mission is finally revealed to the crew. Although he has seemed moody and intense, the crew has not known the source of his grim mood until this moment. Ahab describes the hunt for [Moby Dick](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Moby_Dick) as a vendetta against the whale, but he also presents the mission as if he has been personally insulted by God. He goes on to describe himself as a "prisoner" who must "reach outside the wall" of his limited perceptions. For Ahab, Moby Dick is the "wall" that is blocking his understanding of God's grander plan. Ahab's description of himself as "prisoner" of his limited understanding calls to mind Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, in which the prisoners inside the cave must strive to break free of their chains in order to experience the light of Truth.

Now that all is revealed, the men react in different ways. [Starbuck](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Moby-Dick/character-analysis/#Starbuck) is shocked and disturbed by the idea that the crew would prioritize the killing of one particular whale for vengeance over the general mission to kill whales for profit. He also considers Ahab's personal vendetta against one whale—an animal, after all—to be mad. The harpooners and other crew members seem taken up in the passion of such a hunt, and the idea of winning the gold coin is an extra incentive that creates a frenzy of excitement among the men.

Ahab's ritual, in which he has the men drink grog out of the sockets of the harpoons while swearing to hunt and kill Moby Dick, calls to mind the drinking of wine from a chalice during the Christian sacrament of Eucharist (communion). It makes the oath-taking seem more like taking religious vows than a simple act of obedience to the captain.

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

***Summary Part 1:***

[Ahab](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ahab), after pacing for several days around the quarterdeck, and appearing as though he has something on his mind, tells [Starbuck](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/starbuck) one day to rouse the enter crew aft (or behind the quarterdeck), as Ahab would like to address them. Ahab roars that he will give any man who spots a white whale with a curious jaw, and with three wounds in his side, an ounce of gold (which he nails to the mast of the Pequod). [Tashtego](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters), [Daggoo](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters), and [Queequeg](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/queequeg) wonder aloud if this isn’t [Moby](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/moby-dick) [Dick](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/moby-dick), the same whale that bit off Ahab’s leg, and Ahab agrees, saying that all the men aboard have shipped out not just on a normal whaling mission, but on a mission to capture and kill Moby Dick.

***Analysis Part 1:***

It is notable that this “big reveal,” in which Ahab finally discusses his plans to use the Pequod’s voyage as an excuse to find and kill Moby Dick, does not occur until the ship is well out to sea. Of course, this has a practical advantage—the crew will be less likely to mutiny, if they know that they are already far from land. But it appears that Ahab, and Melville, both want to savor the suspense of this moment—to lead up to it after hundreds of pages of narrative, rather than to have it described at the very beginning of the novel.

***Summary Part 2:***  
[Starbuck](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/starbuck) alone protests to [Ahab](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/ahab), saying that he and others shipped not for “vengeance” on one fish, but on a normal whaling adventure. But Ahab counters that it is not exactly the whale itself he wants to fight and kill, but the thing “behind it,” whatever that might be—perhaps fate, or the unearthly power that has caused Ahab to lose his leg and nearly his life. Ahab then passes around a chalice so that all assembled may drink, and he calls the three harpooneers and mates together, to place their harpoons and hands together, and to agree to hunt [Moby](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/moby-dick) [Dick](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/moby-dick/characters/moby-dick) to the end of the earth. Starbuck is concerned by the strangeness of this ritual of devotion to Ahab, but the rest of the crew seems excited to kill Moby Dick, and Ahab orders them all to disperse soon thereafter.

***Analysis Part 2***

The crew is far from desirous of mutiny, however—they realize that Ahab cannot be dissuaded from his purpose, but they also wish, ardently, to find and kill Moby Dick themselves. The reasons for this are perhaps not easy to explain. Of course, the gold doubloon might be an enticement for some sailors, particularly those who don’t not expect much money from the voyage, because they have been given a “long lay” like Ishmael. But there is something, too, in the collective fervor of the crew: they become “infected” with Ahab’s passion, and wish only to serve their captain. Only the practical Starbuck, who is unaffected by fate or quests for glory, sees anything wrong in these events.