

# Starbuck and pip's influences on ahab: failed attempts at salvation



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Friends are often expected to be brutally honest and tell others that what they are doing is wrong, from shoplifting to dating an abusive person. These are the duties of a friend in modern society, but the same conception of friendship as defensive and saving holds true in nineteenth-century literature. In *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville, Captain Ahab makes many bad decisions as he prioritizes his own selfish revenge over the lives of his crew, yet he carries such a dominating presence that it seems impossible for anyone to confront him. Luckily, however, the two people closest to him, the first mate Starbuck and sailor Pip, are able to reveal to him that what he doing is not right, and are almost successful in stopping his revenge. Starbuck, in his dispute over oil casks and emotional conversation about family with Ahab, and Pip, in his insanity, both come the closest of any characters to redeeming Ahab's bitter soul and making him turn back on his evil quest.

Starbuck's dispute over the leaky oil casks nearly redeems Ahab from his vengeful quest. When pumping the water out of the boat, the men discover that some oil is leaking out of the casks they are stored in. Starbuck, the first mate, goes to Ahab's cabin to ask him to stop the ship temporarily so that they can save the precious oil, but Ahab vehemently refuses, saying, "[I]et it leak! Thou art always prating me, Starbuck, about those miserly owners, as if the owners were my conscience...[M]y conscience is in this ship's keel" (Melville 490). Ahab does not care at all about the financial status of the *Pequod* because his primary concern in the voyage is to catch Moby Dick, not make money from oil. He is so angry that Starbuck would even attempt to tell him what to do that he points a loaded musket at Starbuck's face and

says, “[t]here is one God that is Lord over the earth, and one Captain that is lord over the Pequod” (Melville 491). By comparing himself to God, Ahab shows his egocentrism and the near complete control he has over the ship. However, despite how powerful Ahab gets, Starbuck’s moral compass always encourages him to stand up to him, so Starbuck responds, “ I ask thee not to beware of Starbuck; though wouldst but laugh; but let Ahab beware of Ahab; beware of thyself, old man” (Melville 491). Starbuck’s introspective and brave words have the intended effect on Ahab, who has a “ flash of honesty; or mere prudential policy which, under the circumstance, imperiously forbade the slightest symptom of open disaffection, however transient, in the important chief officer of his ship” (Melville 491). Ahab does not want to lose the respect of his first mate, so he listens to Starbuck and stops the ship to check for leaks. Starbuck carries unique integrity and courage that allow him to stand up to Ahab when no one else will dare, and his ability to extract honesty and respect from inside Ahab gives hope that he may be able to redeem Ahab from his consuming monomania and instead turn him into a considerate captain who wants the best for his ship. Starbuck is successful in convincing Ahab to see his way once, giving him hope that he may be able to do it again and convince him to stop the voyage as a whole.

Starbuck continues to attempt to redeem Ahab, and he nearly convinces him to abandon the vengeful quest as they have an emotional conversation about their families. One night, Ahab is leaning over the deck rail and thinking about his life thus far, and Starbuck approaches him. Ahab instantly begins to pour his heart out to Starbuck and reveals the regret he has in abandoning his wife and child, saying, “ I widowed that poor girl when I

married her, Starbuck; and then, the madness, the frenzy, the boiling blood and smoking brow, with which, for a thousand lowerings old Ahab has furiously, foaming chased his prey—more a demon than a man!—aye aye! what a forty years fool!” (Melville 556). By confiding in the trustworthy Starbuck, Ahab is able to let himself truly succumb to his long built-up emotions, and it seems as if he does not even want to chase Moby Dick anymore, saying that “ old Ahab” was the one obsessed with revenge. Starbuck quickly agrees that chasing the White Whale is foolish and that he and Ahab should both return home to their families, saying, “[o]h my Captain! my Captain! noble soul! Grand old heart, after all! why should any one give chase to that hated fish! Away with me! let us fly these deadly waters! let us home!” (Melville 556). Ahab is deeply moved by Starbuck’s emotion and truly wishes he could bring himself to abandon the pursuit. Between Starbuck’s reverential compliments and emphasis on the importance of family over revenge, Ahab is able to admit that he regrets the voyage and comes the closest he has ever come to redemption—abandoning the revenge quest and returning home instead.

Pip’s insanity also brings Ahab close to redemption. When Ahab first hears Pip speak after the drowning, he is instantly shocked at how empty Pip’s soul seems, saying, “ who art thou, boy? I see not my reflection in the vacant pupils of thy eyes” (Melville 535). Ahab feels a natural draw towards Pip, the only other sailor on the boat who is as insane, if not more insane as him. Ahab instantly takes Pip under his wing, saying, “[t]hou touchest my innermost centre, boy; thou art tied to me by cords woven of my heart-strings” (Melville 536). Ahab instantly feels close ties to Pip because he can

relate to him in their mutual insanity, yet he can also be a fatherly figure to the meek Pip. Pip is “ daft with weakness” while Ahab is “ daft with strength”, so taking care of Pip in their shared cabin extracts Ahab’s compassion and fatherly gentleness that he was never able to impart on his own child (Melville 536). However, Pip also comforts Ahab as an equal. Ahab sees the poor remnants of a soul Pip has left and feels compassion and empathy for him, as his soul is in the same broken state. Thus, Pip is nearly able to redeem Ahab by summoning forth all of the good Ahab has left in his soul. Pip even comes so close to convincing Ahab to abandon his vengeance that Ahab has to physically distance himself from Pip so that his compassion does not overpower his malice, saying, “[I]ike cures like, and for this hunt, my malady becomes my most desired health” (Melville 546). The presence of Pip’s insanity is nearly enough to end Ahab’s, showing that Pip came exceedingly close to redeeming Ahab from his malicious nature and motivating him to end the vengeful quest.

Starbuck’s disputes and deep conversations with Ahab along with Pip’s insanity nearly redeem Ahab and stop him from pursuing his evil voyage. Unfortunately, although these two characters come exceedingly close to changing Ahab’s mind, they ultimately fail because Fate has a stronger hold over Ahab than his own emotions. Ahab believes he no longer has control over his actions, asking, “ what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it... that commands me...making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart, I durst not so much as dare?” (Melville 557). There is a greater power driving Ahab’s actions and leading his soul into the dark depths of evil, beyond what he would have ever reached on his own. This force, presumably

Fate, is stronger than Starbuck and Pip will ever be, making their most earnest attempts futile.