

# Portrayal of ahab in moby dick novel

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## Identifying Ahab

The troubled Captain's obsessive quest for the White Whale serves as the central focus of Melville's *Moby Dick*. Ahab is presented as single-minded in his pursuit of the whale while, using a mixture of charisma and terror to persuade his crew to join him. As a captain, Ahab can be dictatorial to a point of brushing off the concerns of his crew and first mate Starbuck. However, Ishmael recollects moments where Ahab is humble and compassionate to his men. An assumption made by Ahab's distinctive characteristics in addition to what Ishmael recalls, readers judge Ahab through what is presented. Yet with the given material, the reader is unable to form a connection with Ahab.

When Ishmael is first boarding the *Pequod*, Ahab is merely mentioned. For a majority of the beginning, the reader is unaware of Ahab being on the *Pequod*. Like *Moby Dick* the captain's existence comes into question. When finally introduced, Ahab is shown as a powerful enough force to gather everyone on ship to go along his vengeance, especially with a gold piece as a prize for whomever spots the whale. In this scene, Ahab manipulates his position of authority for his own gain, especially considering how he informs the crew of his MO after setting sail and having been at sea for some time. As a result, no one can turn away nor question Ahab's tactics. In the chapter depicting the scene, Starbuck is the only one speaking up about coming aboard to "hunt whales, not [Ahab's] vengeance" especially considering how Ahab's motives won't translate into pay for the crew (Melville 139). Eventually, Ahab announces the crew will hunt other whales. The choice is logical, although the decision has selfish objectives—Ahab's job would be in

jeopardy if he returned without oil and the Pequod's failure to find Moby Dick could result in a mutiny. Nonetheless, it isn't the only surprise Ahab brings to light.

The surprise reveal of Ahab's own crew aboard casts more shade on an already brooding and mysterious character. This new knowledge is suspicious enough until the reader learns how Ahab went through the trouble of hiding them for months only for them to be revealed during a whale hunt. This proves Ahab to be a resourceful and clever man not just for hiding his personal crew, but revealing them at a time of mass chaos when the others wouldn't be able to question his motives. The rest of the crew don't form much of a bond with Ahab's personal crew and refer to one of the members, Fedallah, as a devil and menacing figure when near the captain. His own crew guarantees Ahab a place in killing the whale that damaged him, though at the expense of the trust of his crew and Starbuck and position as a captain. Though Ahab is a damaged and greatly flawed character, Ishmael includes moments where the captain has moments of tenderness and humility. Most noble would be him finding a confidant in African-American bellboy Pip.

His inclusion in Melville's novel serves the purpose of creating more depth and personality to the mad Ahab. He takes in the social outcast similarly acting as a Good Samaritan of sorts. The crazed Ahab is pushed aside for a more friendly and tender version. Despite Pip being a marginal character, he and Ahab complement each other: Ahab is white, Pip isn't; Ahab is the center of the plot, Pip is irrelevant; Ahab is the top of the Pequod hierarchy, while

Pip is at the bottom; Ahab is old and experienced, while Pip is young and knows little. Despite their differences, both view the world through a slightly tilted lens. Both have had near-death experiences and feel alienated from the men on board as a result of the experiences. Pip believes the two have a bond held by “weak souls.” (Melville 392) Ahab takes Pip in almost as a son allowing him to sleep in the captain’s quarters. The time lost from his own family possibly causes Ahab to project this onto Pip. Most importantly, Ahab seems to possess a sliver of sanity when around Pip going as far as to state Pip healing him. Without Ishmael mentioning Pip, Ahab’s character would only be a crazed man playing a vengeful God. There is more dimension and facets to the captain. Unfortunately, Ahab’s insistence of sending Pip back to the cabin makes Pip feel as if he has been abandoned once again and left to his own scattered mind (Melville 400). Ishmael doesn’t mention if Ahab was concerned about the matter. As a result, the reader is left questioning if Ahab truly cared about Pip.

One thing certain about Captain Ahab is Melville presenting him as the archetype of the tragic hero. As a tragic hero, Ahab possesses a flaw resulting in his downfall—a tremendous overconfidence leading him to defy common sense and believe that he can enact his whims while remaining immune to the forces of nature; one such force being his mortality. However, Ahab grows increasingly aware of his fate. As the voyage nears its end, Ahab makes attempts to mend his bond with Starbuck and laments with him over his personal identity, the family he has left in Nantucket, and the forces compelling him to continue with the journey despite knowing the encounter

with Moby Dick is fated to be disastrous and fatal (Melville 405, 6). At first glance, the reader assumes Ahab desires revenge the whale for taking his leg. It is Ishmael revealing that Ahab's monomaniacal quest to find and kill Moby Dick is the result of psychological and physical damage inflicted by a harsh world. Ahab is a broken man repaired by his hatred for the animal making him less of a man.

Further confirming Ahab not being entirely whole is his rage over the lack of one of his legs. As a result of the disability, the captain doesn't fully walk, but the reader assumes he walks with a limp. Ishmael does reveal that when Ahab meets with other ships, he uses a boat specifically made for him and requires the assistance of his own crew to get him on and off of his boat. A pivotal moment of Ahab rendered helpless is when his ivory leg cracks and is unable to get off the floor. Like a young child, he needs the assistance of able men to bring him back. While the Pequod's carpenter makes Ahab a new leg, he is confined to his cabin and can only reach the carpenter by leaning on a rail and hopping on his good leg. Ishmael, instead, gives his former captain a sense of nobility and dignity by stating Ahab is "advancing" to the carpenter (Melville 356, 359). The reader can interpret this as an act of kindness in not speaking ill of Ahab considering his fate or as a man needlessly glorifying another man as Ishmael doesn't speak ill of Ahab even when he having bouts of insanity, stubbornness, and fits of violence. Ahab is a victim and an aggressor, but he isn't an evil man. Ahab's perception of Moby Dick as the embodiment of evil demonstrates his biased

projection about what he wants to see when interpreting symbols and omens as the voyage continues.

Ishmael recollects sparse moments of Ahab questioning his revenge and quest to kill Moby Dick. One of the first moments takes place in the chapter The Sphinx. Ahab makes his way to the head of a sperm whale his crew has killed as asks the head to: “ speak...tell us the secret thing that is in thee.... Where unrecorded names and navies rust, and untold hope and anchors rot; where in her murderous hold this frigate earth is ballasted with bones of millions of the drowned; there, in that awful water-land, there was thy familiar home.... where sleepless mothers would give their lives to lay them down.” (Melville 249)

Ahab’s soliloquy comes from a disturbed man’s mind. Begging for the answers to a slain whale Ahab believes has seen things that might shake the faith of Abraham—of the Bible—shows desperation in finding truth and solace about life and death in a mysterious and complicated world. In summary, Ahab is questioning himself; something happening again as the Pequod nears its final destination. The chapter before the final confrontation with the titular whale, Ahab turns to Starbuck and laments about his conceivably wasted life:

“ Forty years of continual whaling! forty years of privation, and peril, and storm-time! forty years on the pitiless sea! .... forsaken the peaceful land, for forty years to make war on the horrors of the deep! .... I have not spent three ashore. When I think of the life I have led...the weariness... of solitary

command... oceans away I wedded a girl... rather a widow with her husband alive!" (Melville 405)

Making Ahab's monologue particularly heart breaking is how self-aware he appears to be about his megalomaniac pursuit of Moby Dick. Ahab recognizes his "madness, frenzy, the boiling blood" have incited him to foolishly chase the whale at the expense of leaving behind a young wife and child. Additionally, Ahab speaks of an unknown force rendering him a "cruel" and "remorseless" causing him to ignore pleas for help and offers to have a drink from other ships. He states how he wants to stay in his fury-induced state to catch the creature that made him the way the reader and Ishmael see him. Unfortunately, these motives bring him to his failed confrontation with Moby Dick and ultimately, with Death.

In conclusion, the reader is left without much of a choice; they must agree with Ishmael on his portrayal of Ahab; Ishmael is the de facto captain of Moby Dick. Agreeing with Ishmael's memories of Ahab doesn't provide much insight to the captain as a whole as we realize Ishmael has left out some memories and moments of him, though the theory cannot truly be proven. However, they don't have to take the novel as the gospel truth. The reader grasps that Ishmael is telling what he considers to be the more important parts of his story and about the world he was a part of. It is as close to the perfect novel Ishmael and Melville will be able to produce and it cannot be altered to the reader's nor Ishmael's liking. Ishmael's time on the Pequod and under the orders of Captain Ahab are his version of a documentary truth

and as perfect of a story as he is able to feature nine years after the doomed voyage.