

Captain ahab's journey of self- destruction



Captain Ahab, the fifty-eight year old commander of the Pequod, is one of the most fascinating mortals in literary history. The reader witnesses him teetering between sanity and madness, with the latter winning each slight battle and eventually conquering his entire mind, body, and spirit. This, however, does not simply happen to Ahab, for he plays an absolutely active role in his own demise. The choices that he consciously makes, knowing the outcomes that will follow, are of his own accord. This journey of self-destruction is goaded along by four significant turning points in the development of Ahab's mad suicide mission. The captain's preliminary altercation with Moby Dick, the night he convinces the Pequod's crew to undertake his quest, Fedallah's prophecy, and Ahab's decisive, fatal, irrevocable clash with the White Whale are the most significant, character-altering events on the ill-fated captain's suicidal pilgrimage. The first significant event in the development of Ahab's monomania is his initial encounter with his obsession, Moby Dick. Though this event has already happened when the reader first comes upon Captain Ahab, it is discussed and alluded to throughout the text and is the indispensable trigger of Ahab's obsession. When a young Ahab, overconfident enough to cover a lifetime of emotional and physical trauma, encounters an oceangoing beast such as Moby Dick, he is threatened by the loss of his precious leg to the voracious, malicious jaws of the whale. Having a fanatical mother and an arduous existence, Ahab is no stranger to the inequities of life. He has seen much evil, and is separated from his wife and child, some of the only people he is capable of showing compassion for, by his demanding, lonely life aboard the whaling ship. Ahab blames God for the injustice among men that his life exemplifies, and therefore he feels that because God created such injustice,

<https://assignbuster.com/captain-ahabs-journey-of-self-destruction/>

God is not perfect. This leads Ahab to the conclusion that he is superior even to The Creator. Because he robs Ahab of his independence and contributes to the inequality of Ahab's life by taking his leg, Moby Dick is the scapegoat Ahab needs for all of this evil and hatred. In other words, Moby Dick, to Ahab, is God-incarnate and conquerable. Because Ahab has godlike opinions of himself, he feels that he is capable of destroying this evil and remaining unscathed. Without this jumping off point, which provides Ahab the insane motivation to destroy the White Whale, destroy all of the evil in his world, and conquer an unjust God, the entire doomed quest for the hide of Moby Dick would not be undertaken. The next decisive event in Ahab's journey of self-destruction is the night aboard the Pequod when he convinces his crew to become co-conspirators in his plot to annihilate the White Whale. During his first formal appearance before his crowd of sailors, he excites their curiosities by asking straightforward questions that grow increasingly fervent to draw them into his sick plans for the voyage. Ahab is magnificently, chillingly zealous as his impassioned cries hypnotize and enthrall his wild-eyed crew. Cheering and shouting in harmony, Ahab's men cannot help but become wrapped up in his scheme as he feeds them alcohol, baptizes the harpooners' weapons, and bonds the crew together with his intoxicating, manipulatively charismatic personality. This event is significant because Ahab now has now convinced a large group of men to support his insane pursuit. Because he has gained the backing of these men, he is able to reassure himself that he is undertaking a rational quest. Now that he has convinced his crew to accept his goal, there is no turning back. After the events on the quarter-deck, Ahab spends even more time below deck, fanatically perusing charts of the world's great ocean and becoming

increasingly obsessed with his ultimate goal. He is dogged in his mission to destroy the White Whale. Ahab becomes all the more certain of his own invincibility when Fedallah, his own personal harpooner, prophesies the improbable conditions Ahab's death will require. Fedallah declares that Ahab will only die if he sees two hearses on the ocean, one not made by man and one made from American-grown wood, only if Fedallah dies first, and only by hemp. Despite many recent omens that Ahab should give up Moby Dick and return to Nantucket, this prophecy seems so implausible that any fears Ahab may have are calmed. He is convinced that death on this mission impossible because that is what he wants to believe. Reassured that he is untouchable and that his quest is destined to be a success, Ahab is primed to take extreme risks. The final noteworthy event in Ahab's nearly lifelong battle with Moby Dick is the last whale chase of the mad captain's despondent life. Nearly convinced by Starbuck to relinquish his dammed dreams of destroying the White Whale, Ahab presses on and is temporarily appeased when he sees his obsession from the mast-head. Overcome with pathetic giddiness, he cries out, "There she blows! There she blows! A hump like a snow-hill! It's Moby Dick!" Rejecting all reasonable thought once and for all, Ahab lowers the boats and engages in the fateful three-day chase of the leviathan. Ahab knows that he is doomed, offering Starbuck the opportunity to remain on the ship so that at least the first-mate may live to see his wife and children again. Without misgivings, Ahab lowers for his prey three times, despite numerous clues and warnings that he should take advantage of his last opportunity to abandon the mission that promises certain death. Ahab knows he will fail, and may only wait in anxious conviction for the end. Each day, the White Whale taunts Ahab and his sailors, bringing them

dangerously close to death. Ahab, however, continues to come rowing back for more, acknowledging his own audacity. The first day of the chase, when Moby Dick smashes Ahab's boat amid a hurricane of harpoons, the annoyed whale gives the proud men one last chance to get away. Even the death of Fedallah and near-fulfillment of his prophecy cannot stop Ahab, who does not understand his own motivations. Just before his death, standing in his lone whaleboat, Ahab finally comes to the realization that he is in no place to seek revenge or justice. One may argue that Ahab's character is most mature in the final seconds of his existence, because he has finally realized that all his life, he has been driven by emotion rather than reason. This insight comes too late, however, and catharsis is achieved as he is denied even the honor of going down with the ship he commanded. Captain Ahab destroys himself through a tragic sequence of events that litter the pages of Melville's masterpiece. From his original encounter with Moby Dick, to the night he captivates the crew of the Pequod with his passionate quest, to Fedallah's prophecy, to his final battle with the White Whale, Ahab's life epitomizes a journey of self-destruction. We pity rather than hate this wretched old man who is only trying to make sense out of his unjust life and an unreasonable God.