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Moby-Dick

Herman Melville · *1851 · original English text*

Ishmael goes to sea and ships aboard the Pequod, whose captain, Ahab, has lost a leg to the white whale. Ahab turns a whaling voyage into a holy war of revenge and drags his crew with him. Against him stand Father Mapple's sermon on Jonah, Starbuck's conscience, and the plain duties of mercy.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What becomes of a man who makes his grievance against creation into his god?

"Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me."
Ahab to Starbuck · Ch. 36, "The Quarter-Deck"

Ahab's will consumes his ship, his crew and himself; the one who survives is the quiet observer who learned friendship and humility along the way.

KEY CHARACTERS

Ishmael
narrator; humility and wonder

Captain Ahab
pride, defiance, monomania

Starbuck
conscience, duty, faith

Queequeg
loyal friendship

Father Mapple
the preacher of Jonah

Stubb & Flask
the mates who never question

Pip
the forgotten boy Ahab pities

Fedallah
Ahab's dark prophet

Moby Dick
the white whale

FATHER MAPPLE'S SERMON

> *"Delight,—top-gallant delight is to him, who acknowledges no law or lord, but the Lord his God, and is only a patriot to heaven."*
> **Father Mapple** · Ch. 9, "The Sermon"

Grades 9–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01 Going to Sea

CHAPTERS 1–23

A restless young man finds a friend and a sermon.

- **Ishmael** ships out on a whaler to drive off his gloom
- At the Spouter-Inn he must share a bed with **Queequeg**, a South Sea harpooneer
- The two become bosom friends
- **Father Mapple** preaches on Jonah: obedience to God, repentance, truth to the proud
- They sign aboard the **Pequod** at Nantucket; its captain has not yet been seen

> *"And if we obey God, we must disobey ourselves; and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists."*
> **Father Mapple** · Ch. 9, "The Sermon"

02 The Captain

CHAPTERS 26–36

A wounded man takes command of every soul aboard.

- The mates: pious **Starbuck**, easygoing **Stubb**, combative **Flask**
- **Ahab** appears on a leg made from a sperm whale's jaw
- On the quarter-deck he nails a gold doubloon to the mast as the prize
- He reveals the true voyage: to hunt **Moby Dick**, the white whale that took his leg
- The crew swears his oath; Starbuck alone objects

> *"To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous."*
> **Starbuck** · Ch. 36, "The Quarter-Deck"

03 The Mask

CHAPTERS 36–48

Ahab reads the whale as a wall between himself and God.

- Ahab believes a hidden malice works behind the visible world
- Ishmael meditates on the terror of "The Whiteness of the Whale"
- Ahab studies charts to predict the whale's path
- A secret boat crew led by **Fedallah** emerges at the first lowering

> *"If man will strike, strike through the mask!"*
> **Ahab** · Ch. 36, "The Quarter-Deck"

04 The Whaling World

CHAPTERS 48–110

Labor, brotherhood and the vastness of creation.

- Ishmael catalogues whales, ships and the brutal work of the hunt
- Squeezing spermaceti, he feels a sudden brotherhood with his shipmates
- The cabin boy **Pip** is left adrift on the open sea and loses his wits
- At the try-works at night Ishmael nearly steers the ship wrong, turned toward the fire
- Queequeg falls ill and has a coffin built; he recovers

> *"Give not thyself up, then, to fire, lest it invert thee, deaden thee"*
> **Ishmael** · Ch. 96, "The Try-Works"

05 Warnings Refused

CHAPTERS 100–132

Every sign says turn back; Ahab will not.

- A captain who lost an arm to Moby Dick wants nothing more to do with him
- Ahab tempers his harpoon "in the name of the devil" and smashes his quadrant
- Starbuck takes up a loaded musket at Ahab's door — and does not fire
- The **Rachel**'s captain begs for help finding his lost son; Ahab refuses
- On a gentle day Ahab weeps and almost turns for home

> *"Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?"*
> **Ahab to Starbuck** · Ch. 132, "The Symphony"

06 The Chase

CHAPTERS 133–135 & EPILOGUE

Three days, one survivor.

- For three days the boats chase Moby Dick; Fedallah is lost
- The whale rams and sinks the Pequod
- Ahab's own harpoon line catches him and drags him under
- Ishmael alone survives, floating on Queequeg's coffin
- The Rachel, still searching for her children, picks him up

> *"from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee."*
> **Ahab, at the end** · Ch. 135, "The Chase — Third Day"

Pride & Defiance | Obedience to God | Friendship | Conscience & Duty | Mercy Refused | The Sea & Creation

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. Hold Father Mapple's sermon beside Ahab's quarter-deck speech. Who obeys God, and who demands that God answer to him?
2. Watch Starbuck. What does he see clearly, and why does he never quite act on it?
3. Notice each ship the Pequod meets. What does each one warn or offer, and how does Ahab respond?
4. Track Queequeg's coffin from his illness to the Epilogue.
5. Ask why Ishmael survives. What has he learned that Ahab never did?
6. The long whaling chapters are part of the point: ask what they teach about labor and the greatness of creation.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #2701, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/moby-dick/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.