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# ***20,000 Leagues Under the Sea***

by

**Jules Verne**

**1870**



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by TheBestNotes Staff

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## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### SETTING

The story begins in 1866 and ends in 1868 (The journey on the *Nautilus* begins during the summer of 1867). The story is set on the *Nautilus*, the submarine vessel designed by.....

### LIST OF CHARACTERS

#### Major Characters

**Dr. Pierre Aronnax** - the narrator, aged forty. He is a former medical doctor turned scientist and lecturer at the Museum of Paris. He is unmarried and childless. He resides in Paris with his manservant, Conseil. While lecturing in the United States, he is asked by the U.S. government to join the expedition aboard the *Abraham Lincoln* in search of the mysterious monster that has been attacking ships.

**Conseil** - Aronnax's domestic servant. He is thirty years old. He follows Aronnax on all of his voyages and never offers counsel. He is knowledgeable of science, yet has little practice. He never complains.

**Ned Land** - a Canadian traveling on the *Abraham Lincoln*. He is revered as the king of.....

### CONFLICT

**Protagonist** - The protagonist of a story is the main character, who traditionally, undergoes some sort of change. He or She must usually overcome some opposing force. In *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* the protagonist is Dr. Pierre Aronnax. He is the narrator and central character of the tale. Aronnax is repeatedly described as a naturalist throughout the story. A naturalist is, essentially, a person who is.....

**Antagonist** - The antagonist of a story is the character that provides an obstacle for the protagonist. In this case the antagonist is Captain Nemo. The obstacle is the imprisonment of .....

**Climax** - The climax of a story is the major turning point that determines the outcome of the plot. It is the point to which the rising action leads. In this story the climax is in Chapter 22, "Captain Nemo's .....

**Outcome** - also known as the resolution or denouement, this is the place in the plot where the action is resolved or clarified. In this novel, the outcome is that the men survive the giant whirlpool. Captain .....

### SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

The story opens in the year 1866. Everyone in Europe and America is talking about a mysterious creature that has been sinking ships. Finally, the United States government decides to intervene and commissions the *Abraham Lincoln* to capture and identify the creature. On board the ship are Pierre Aronnax, a renowned scientist along with his manservant, Conseil, and Ned Land the king of harpooners.

The *Abraham Lincoln* is attacked by the creature. Aronnax, Conseil and Land go overboard. The three men find themselves on top of the mysterious creature, which is actually a submarine vessel. They are taken on board and placed in a cell.

The men meet Captain Nemo, the commander of the vessel, known as the *Nautilus*. He tells them they can stay on board the ship and enjoy freedom as long as they return to the cell if asked. They are never to leave the vessel again. Ned Land says he will not promise that he will not try to escape.

Captain Nemo treats the men, especially Aronnax, very well. They are clothed and fed and may wander around the vessel at their leisure. Aronnax is thrilled by Nemo's vast library. The men spend their time observing.....

## THEMES

### Major Theme

**Man versus Nature** - This major theme of the story is encapsulated both in the conflict between Aronnax and Nemo as well as Nemo and himself. Aronnax, the “naturalist” must decide between his own love of science and his fellow man. Nemo, who has gained incredible power by defying nature, must reconcile his power and his humanity.

### Minor Themes

**Revenge** - Captain Nemo repeatedly mentions that he is seeking revenge for injustices he incurred while on land. Interestingly, the reader must consider that while Nemo’s violence seems senseless and evil, he is not necessarily different from a nation state. For example, Nemo has declared himself.....

## MOOD

The mood, or atmosphere of a book, is the general feeling of the story. This is usually portrayed through word choice, description, and characterization. This story is primarily mysterious and dark. The mystery results from the author’s preoccupation with Captain Nemo’s identity. The entire plot is .....

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Adapted from “A Chronology of Jules Verne” in William Butcher’s 1998 translation.

Jules Verne is an immensely important and prolific French writer. Along with H.G. Wells, he is responsible for the founding of science-fiction writing. Jules Verne was born on 8 February 1828 in Nantes, France. His father was a successful lawyer, from a family of many lawyers and his mother was from a military family. Jules was the oldest of five children; he had one brother and three sisters.

In school he did very well in geography and wrote fiction and poetry frequently. He moved to Paris to study law, and became engaged to his cousin, Caroline Thompson—although, they never married. During this.....

## LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

When reading *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*, particularly because it is a work of science-fiction, it is very important to remember that it was written in 1870. At this time people traveled by horse and carriage, ships, and increasingly, railroads. Therefore, the idea of a submarine that could reach the bottom of the sea was astounding. It might be comparable with an individual traveling through space today.

Jules Verne’s idea of a submarine was not entirely original, neither was his name for the vessel, *Nautilus*. In the latter part of the nineteenth century many people were experimenting with diving bells, commonly called *Nautilite* and *Nautilus*. In fact, the first plans for a submarine were produced in 1580 and it is thought that the first working submarine was created in 1623. Submarines that would have more.....

## GENRE

*20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* is a science-fiction novel. Jules Verne and H.G. Wells are credited with founding the genre. Science fiction engages science and technology. Works in this.....

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES AND NOTES

### PART I

#### CHAPTER 1: “A Shifting Reef”

##### Summary

The first chapter opens in the year 1866. Apparently, an “unexplainable” and “strange” event has occurred. Everyone in Europe and America is talking about this event. The sea men, in particular, are disturbed.

Throughout the summer of 1866, various ships report the sighting of a huge creature, rapidly moving and with blowholes.

In all of the cities people sing about and discuss the “monster.” Even the scientific community debates over the existence and nature of the creature. By the beginning of 1867, the discussion of the monster settles a bit. However, on March 5 another ship was struck. Three weeks later an identical accident occurs. The second accident, which happens to a ship—the *Scotia*—from a very prestigious line, incensed the public. All shipwrecks come to be blamed on the monster. The people on both continents demand that the waters be rid of the monster—whatever the cost.

## **CHAPTER 2: “Pros and Cons”**

### **Summary**

The narrator of the story, Pierre Aronnax, introduces himself as a scientist and lecturer at the Museum of Natural History in Paris. For the six months prior to the attack of the *Scotia* he has been doing work in the Badlands of Nebraska. Shortly after the *Scotia* was hit, he travels to New York to organize his specimens and await return to Paris.

Debate rages over what the cause of the accidents could be. The ideas of a floating reef or an enormous ship wreck are quickly rejected. People are left with two possible solutions: a gigantic monster or a submarine vessel.

Aronnax tells us that it is unlikely that the accidents were caused by a submarine vessel. It is highly unlikely that an individual would have the vast resources to produce such a mechanical wonder. It is also unlikely that a government would create the vessel as an instrument of war because the governments – following the incident with the *Scotia*—denied creating any secret submarine. The narrator says that in the interest of the public and intercontinental communication, the governments have to be believed.

As the monster theory gained more strength, the narrator was consulted for his expertise. He previously published a two volume work, titled *The Mysteries of the Ocean Deep*s. Forced to make some conclusion, Aronnax makes a statement about the monster, saying either they do not know what it is because they have not discovered all species of animals, or it is a Great Narwhal. This creature is an exaggeration of a common narwhal, which is a sea unicorn. While the common narwhal can reach sixty feet, the Great Narwhal is ten times, or more, larger. Its power is proportional to its size. The horn of a narwhal is ivory and has the hardness of steel. Narwhals frequently attack whales and ships. A Great Narwhal would be exponentially more dangerous than a common narwhal.

The narrator’s article spawns considerable debate. The governments on each side of the Atlantic decide to hunt the monster. The United States deploys its ship the *Abraham Lincoln*. However, the monster halted its destruction. Finally, on July 3 the monster attacks in the Pacific Ocean. Aronnax receives a letter from the secretary to the United States Navy that they would like him to join in the expedition aboard the *Abraham Lincoln*, set to sail the Pacific Ocean.

## **CHAPTER 3: “As Monsieur Pleases”**

### **Summary**

Upon reading the letter from the Navy Secretary, Aronnax tells us that he realized his main purpose in life was to rid the world of the monster. Despite his fatigue from traveling for so long and longing for home, Aronnax accepts the American government’s invitation. He believes the monster will end up in the waters off the French coast as a special favor to him, and because “all roads lead to Europe.”

Aronnax and his domestic servant, Conseil, make immediate preparations and board the *Abraham Lincoln*, where they meet Captain Farragut—the ship's captain.

## **CHAPTER 4: "Ned Land"**

### **Summary**

The narrator describes Captain Farragut as a good sailor who was one with the *Abraham Lincoln*. He is led by his faith that the monster exists. He is certain he will find the monster. The ship's crew keeps close watch for the monster. They are also very excited and believe in the existence of the creature. Captain Farragut promises two thousand dollars to the first person to spot the creature.

The ship is equipped with every weapon of destruction. More importantly, aboard the *Abraham Lincoln* is Ned Land, a Canadian and the king of harpooners. He is a large and quiet man, easily angered when contradicted. He is worth the rest of the crew combined. Aronnax says that Canadians are really Frenchmen and that Land is attracted to him because of his nationality. Land's family is from Quebec—which originally belonged to France.

Ned Land does not share Pierre Aronnax's view that the creature is a narwhal. Land says that is his experience as a whaler he has never seen a narwhal puncture a ship. Aronnax tries to persuade Land with statistics and mathematical calculations that an infinitely powerful creature could inhabit the depth of the seas. Land becomes responsive to the possibility that a creature might exist, but he still does not concede that such a creature is responsible for the incidents with the ships. Land appears to need to experience such a creature to believe in it. Aronnax believes that Land is merely stubborn.

## **CHAPTER 5: "In Search of Adventure"**

### **Summary**

On June 30 (note Verne's chronology is not always clear and is often incorrect) Land impresses the crew and Aronnax when he harpoons two whales at the request of another ship. His prowess makes Aronnax believe that he will be successful in capturing the monster. The sailors remain drawn to the waters, driven by the lure of money. Aronnax says that he is not propelled by the chance of winning the two thousand dollars; he watches only out of his own curiosity. Ned Land, conversely, spends most of his time reading and sleeping in his cabin—this behavior outrages Aronnax.

Land believes the claims of those who have encountered the monster: it is invisible and unbelievably fast. He tells Aronnax that if they consider the monster's past habits, it is very likely that he is far away from where there are—the sight of the last incident.

After three months of seeing no sign of the creature, the crew becomes discouraged and skeptical. They decide to return home. The captain asks for three more days. On the third day, Ned Land spots the creature.

## **NOTES AND ANALYSIS OF CHAPTERS 1 - 5**

In these opening chapters, we are introduced to three of the four main characters: Pierre Aronnax, Conseil, and Ned Land. We also find the premise on which the conflict of the story is based—the men are seeking to destroy that which is destroying humanity. Later, when they are on board the *Nautilus* this conflict will change slightly to man (humanity) versus machine (the *Nautilus*).

Pierre Aronnax is a classic pedant. He is consumed by scholarship, almost to the extent that he does not relate to the real world. He continuously, throughout the book, makes obscure references to classical philosophers and scientists. These references rarely advance the plot, except to develop the characterization of Aronnax.

Ned Land is quite opposite of Aronnax. He is gruff and unrefined. He is described as “American,” although he is really from Canada. It is clear that Aronnax is extremely biased to French culture. Furthermore, he seems to think of American culture as unrefined.

Land and Aronnax are foils of one another in these opening chapters; that is, they are characters who, in their differences, illuminate the characteristics of the other. In the case of Aronnax and Land, Aronnax relies too much on theoretical evidence (another example of his pedantic nature) where Land relies too much on empirical evidence (he only believes what he experiences). In his official report on the situation with the monster, Aronnax offers various reasons why it is possible that a giant narwhal may exist. However, he concludes his report by saying that despite what has been “glimpsed, seen, felt, and experienced” there may be nothing in the sea at all. He says he added this statement because he was a coward and afraid of what the scientific community might think of him. This reasoning exemplifies Aronnax’s personality: he is unable to rely on his senses, or on “real life” experience. He must be able to reason everything scientifically. He is more inclined to believe science than his own experience.

Ned Land is the opposite. His excellent eye sight is symbolic of his ability to rely on his senses. He has excellent senses—he is able to sleep and read all day because he knows the creature is not near the boat. He does not believe anything that he has not seen or experienced himself- this is a reoccurring theme throughout the novel.....

## OVERALL ANALYSES

### CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Pierre Aronnax** - Aronnax is the main character, narrator, and protagonist of this novel. He is a classic pedant. He makes obscure references, greatly respects social protocol, and refuses to base his relationship with the world around him on his senses—he relies entirely on what he reads and.....

**Captain Nemo** - Nemo is the antagonist of the novel. He presents the situation that causes Aronnax to change: he creates the *Nautilus*. Nemo is the most complex character in this book. He appears to be a.....

**Ned Land** - Ned Land’s name obviously comes from Land, meaning “terra firma” as Verne often calls it. Ned Land is a harpooner by trade; he hunts what is in the sea, he is attached to the Land. He is also.....

**Conseil** - In French conseil means counsel. Aronnax tells us that his manservant never offers counsel. However, this seems to be another example of Aronnax’s arrogance, because Conseil frequently.....

### PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The plot of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* is essentially simple: Three men set out to capture and explain the unexplainable. Instead they are captured and encounter a brilliant madman who travels the seas seeking revenge and beauty. The men cannot continue in such a manner, so they risk their lives to free themselves.

A good portion of this novel is mere entertainment. Verne spends paragraphs explaining geography and marine life. These descriptions do little to advance the plot except when characterization is revealed through their observation.

The real genius of this work, besides its incessant entertainment, lies in its ability to.....

**Exposition:** The exposition of the novel occurs in the first chapter. In this chapter we meet.....

**Rising Action:** Each encounter the men have with Nemo bring them closer to their ultimate need to.....



**Climax:** The climax occurs when the men try to escape. This is a monumental decision because it presents a case in which Aronnax is trusting his own senses and those of Land. Furthermore, Aronnax is.....

**Outcome:** The mood of this novel is mysterious. At the book's resolution, the reader is not .....

## THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

The major theme of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* is Man vs. Nature. In this novel man vs. nature is a bit more complex than the typical man vs. nature theme, which usually entails men battling the forces of nature. In this case, which is typical of science-fiction, man is trying to overcome nature; man.....

## POINT OF VIEW

This story is told in the first person- limited point of view. This means it is told through the experience of....

## QUOTES - IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS AND ANALYSIS

1. ***"I am not what you call a civilized man! I have done with society entirely, for reasons which I alone have the right of appreciating. I do not, therefore, obey its laws, and I desire you never to allude to them before me again!"*** - Captain Nemo

This quotation reveals that Nemo believes he has completely separated himself from humanity. Furthermore, it reveals how easily he can anger and that he never plans to tell the men about his past or his intentions.....

## SYMBOLISM / MOTIFS / IMAGERY / SYMBOLS

**The giant pearl** - It is important to note Nemo's cultivation of the giant pearl. He wants to leave it undisturbed so that it will become greater. This is juxtaposition with the *Nautilus*. The longer the vessel remains undiscovered the more powerful it becomes. Like the *Nautilus*, pearls have .....

## Important /Key Facts Summary

**Title:** *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*

**Author:** Jules Verne

**Date of first publishing:** 1870

**Meaning of the Title:** Refers to traveling thousands of miles under surface of the oceans. Appropriate because of the setting on a submarine. ....

## VOCABULARY

*Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* contains a plethora of scientific words and measurements that can be confusing:

**Acre** - a measurement of surface area equal to 43,560 square feet, approximately the size of a football field.

**Annelids** - worms

**Babiroussa** - A pig from the East Indies.....

## STUDY QUESTIONS - MULTIPLE CHOICE QUIZ

1. In the beginning of the story, the public on both sides of the Atlantic is concerned about:
  - A. The Industrial Revolution
  - B. An unidentified sea creature
  - C. A world war
2. What government commissions a ship to solve the problem?
  - A. The United States
  - B. England

France.....

### **ANSWER KEY**

1) B 2) A 3) C 4) A 5) A 6) C 7) B 8) B 9) B 10) C 11) A 12) B 13) A 14) C 15) B

### **ESSAY TOPICS / BOOK REPORT IDEAS**

1. Write an essay describing the first encounter between Captain Nemo and the three men from Nemo's perspective. Make sure to include any fears he might have about the men escaping with his secrets
2. What do you think happened to the *Nautilus* after the incident with the whirlpool? If it did not survive, how might the end have been for Captain Nemo? If it did, where did Nemo go next?.....

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