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Summer Tones (ENGL 65.03)

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No Quarter For “The Quarterdeck”: The Obsession Of Making *Moby-Dick* Comic

I did not think I had anything in common with a peg leg captain hellbent on killing a white whale until I made this comic. Adapting just one chapter of Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* into comic form became a deeply obsessive project that consumed most of my time and energy and became extremely personal. Although I initially thought of it as a creative adaptation, I found myself not just retelling, but reinterpreting the “Quarterdeck” chapter to imagine the background characters, the metaphors, and the implied in the text. In order to create the comic, I immersed myself in the fandom surrounding *Moby-Dick*, the ways in which they cut, modified, and dissected this famous scene, and my own artistic process began to mirror that maniacal discourse. My sleep schedule got exponentially worse in ways I didn’t think a college student could accomplish, and I became *Moby-Dick*’s most annoying fan to date. Really all I talked about during the month that went into this comic was *Moby Dick Moby Dick Moby Dick*. And there is a lot to unpack about the making of a *Moby-Dick* comic. Concrete analysis of the comic itself reveals how I imagined the subtext and emotions of the crew during Ahab’s speech and tailored (and questioned) my own adaptation, and the obsession inherent to art and personalizing this comic fueled my mission to understand comics’ elusive qualities and *Moby-Dick*’s excess. This is my personal attempt at striking the sun. I’m glad my comic survived its own harpoon-line.

Just Two Colors? Is It Because Your iPad Crashes When You Add More?

(Maybe)

I have never been keen on using color in my art, especially in comics. It seems like it subtracts from the ambiguity of a scene, partially because it separates the subject from their background by making forms more distinct. As Scott McCloud describes black and white art in *Understanding Comics*, “The ideas behind the art are communicated more directly. Meaning transcends form” (192). This rang true when leafing through Matt Kish’s *Moby-Dick in Pictures*, for although color caught my eye, black and white felt more serious, and perhaps more opaque in meaning. Black and white allows Kish to play with complicated line art (Illustration #102) — the ‘howling infinite’ being described is more daunting because of its lack of color. Even when playing with words as form, as in Illustration #127, black and white renders the whale tails more clearly in negative space. Still, using just black and white felt harsh and one-dimensional, especially for a scene as emotional as “The Quarterdeck.” So I chose blue and red, complementary colors, and limited myself to those two colors throughout. Though it isn’t entirely consistent, color has both practical and thematic purposes, sometimes intertwining. Using two colors allows characters to be distinguished from complicated backgrounds, such as on page 5, and breaks up a page into somewhat harmonious segments, such as on page 3 where Stubb and Flask are distinguished by being colored differently.

Thematically, color serves as an indicator of emotion — and not just Ahab’s diva moments, though there are a lot we will look at in greater detail later. Look at page 3 again — although Stubb is colored blue, his speech bubble (which bubbles out of his pipe just for fun) is red to mirror the agitation he feels seeing Ahab, also colored red as he paces. Likewise, on page 7 I chose to color Ahab and his speech bubbles red, but then chose to color the crew’s responses

red to show how mania, over the course of call and response dialogue, infects the entire crew. Ishmael, despite being shaken, cannot help but be caught up in the group and is also colored red. Even as he questions how “they themselves became so excited at purposeless questions” on page 8, his eyes remain wide and frenzied. Red is the color of agitation, boldness, and damnation — all things Ahab is hellbent on infecting his crew with.

But blue plays just as important a role. Background characters surrounding Ahab are colored blue (page 11), and Starbuck emerges as an especially important blue-coded character. Starbuck is deliberately colored in blue (pages 4, 8, and 12), save for one very important panel on page 18 where Ahab’s starburst shines apocalyptic red light onto his (blue) figure. Throughout *Moby-Dick*, Starbuck remains relatively rational, often harboring doubts about Ahab’s mania as in “The Quarterdeck”, considering mutiny in “The Musket”, and trying in vain to talk Ahab out of his insanity in “The Symphony.” He is usually colored blue in response to Ahab’s being red, and I use “in response to” because I initially drew Ahab as the central character of the comic. Therefore Ahab would be red, to draw the reader's attention. This meant that Starbuck, someone who I had initially considered a secondary element of the scene, acted as an important color contrast to Ahab’s dialogue and person. More than just being a voice of reason, Starbuck emerged as the one person who can predict the doomed nature of their hunt, which is ultimately why the last page chose not to focus on the frenzied mob Ahab stirs up, but Starbuck’s face, half shadowed in inverted blue and white for a ghostly effect, shows that one foot was already in the grave as soon as Ahab started his speech.

Emotions, So Many Of Them At Once

McCloud described “meaning” and “form” as two separate qualities of comics, but working off of a preexisting text that had already been adapted thousands of times was a daunting task to take on. Form, or the existing text, determined much of the meaning, or visual subtext, I added through strategic use of color. But I also felt the urge to add one more meaning, or the element of hesitation to the scene. This is something Ishmael’s narration hints at but does not fully depict. Because Ishmael is the only narrator of the scene (something that will also be discussed in more detail soon), he has no access to the mates’ or harpooneers’ inner thoughts. Kish embraced the lack of interiority, focusing only on dialogue for Illustration #160: “Death to Moby Dick!” with bold color filling the letter spaces to highlight the statement’s grotesque implication. That inspired the dialogue superimposed on the crowd on page 24, though I chose to take a more realistic approach to the faces than Kish. But there are varied expressions in my crowd as well: the person just above “God” is terrified. The person behind “to” has a furrowed brow. Of course the predominant figures in the crowd are the angry people in the foreground, but there is significant variation among the crowd even in this moment of unified dialogue. Similarly, Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask are usually in the background to add interest (I wish I had gotten to draw the harpooneers more, but their extremely racialized depictions frankly made me terrified I would offend people) and emotional contrast. Consider the mates’ expressions on page 11: Starbuck is weirded out, Flask is skeptical, and Stubb is spacing out because of one moment of levity I recalled from “The Gilder”, where after the morose musings of Starbuck and Ishmael, he randomly jumps up and declares, “I am Stubb, and Stubb has his history; but here Stubb takes oaths that he has always been jolly!” (Ch. 114). As a collective, they act as an irreverent foil to Ahab’s manic speech. Even though Ahab reveals all of his cards in his dialogue “Death and devils!/Men, it is Moby Dick ye have seen — *Moby Dick, Moby Dick!*” on page 11,

Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask remain impassive and unmoved. Although we see moments of passion for whaling when they themselves kill whales. I imagined they would not be easily swayed by one man's mission against a known deadly whale.

Ishmael And Unreliable Adaptation

Speaking of lack of interiority, did you notice Ishmael has no dialogue in the whole comic? There was one other aspect that realized itself as I drew this comic out, very slowly. I had been painstakingly arranging dialogue for different characters — mostly Ahab, but also Starbuck, Stubb, and the wider cast of the *Pequod* — but never for Ishmael. In fact I am not sure whether he is even the narrator for the entire book since there are scenes that he definitely could not have had access to, so either *Moby-Dick* is an incredible feat of fanfiction or Ishmael is just an overthinker. I chose to focus on the latter, attributing most of the narration to Ishmael's inner thoughts. This is most clearly demonstrated on pages 7-8, where you can see Ishmael is visibly shaken and then wonders "how was it that they themselves became so excited at purposeless questions?" In the original chapter, this quote is more accurately attributed to the wider crew: "The mariners began to gaze curiously at each other, as if marvelling how it was that they themselves became so excited at such seemingly purposeless questions" (Ch. 36). My decision to include this line in only Ishmael's internal monologue ascribes the same reluctance to go along with Ahab that Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask demonstrate, but much less willingness to act. While instances like these were my attempt to characterize Ishmael, I realized over the course of reading the novel that Ishmael rarely speaks after setting sail. Sure, he talks with Queequeg, but when he is on sea most of his dialogue or lengthy internal monologue is about whaling or the other crew. He does not actually speak out loud a lot. So in fitting with this theme, Ishmael

appears in fewer panels than other characters and never speaks. But we can safely assume that most of the narration (in boxes, rather than speech bubbles) is him, so his presence is still felt.

The lengthy narration was also a confounding factor. This is one of the more verbose chapters in *Moby-Dick* where there is both a lot of speaking dialogue and a lot of narration.

Ahab's speech about the lower layer is one huge block of text.

"Hark ye yet again,—the little lower layer. All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the moldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. For could the sun do that, then could I do the other; since there is ever a sort of fair play herein, jealousy presiding over all creations. But not my master, man, is even that fair play. Who's over me? Truth hath no confines. Take off thine eye! more intolerable than fiends' glarings is a dolish stare! So, so; thou reddened and palest; my heat has melted thee to anger-glow. But look ye, @ Starbuck, what is said in heat, that thing unsays itself. There are men from whom warm words are small indignity. I meant not to incense thee. Let it go. Look! see yonder Turkish checks of spotted tawn—living, breathing pictures painted by the sun. The Pagan leopards—the unrecking and unworshipping things, that live; and seek, and give no reasons for the torrid life they feel! The crew, man, the crew! Are they not one and all with Ahab, in this matter of the whale? See Stubbs! he laughs! See yonder Chilian! he snorts to think of it. Stand up amid the general hurricane, thy one tost sapling cannot, Starbuck! And what is it? Reckon it. 'Tis but to help strike a fin; no wondrous feat for Starbuck. What is it more? From this one poor hunt, then, the best lance out of all Nantucket, surely he will not hang back, when every foremost-hand has clutched a whetstone? Ah! constraints seize thee; I see! the billow lifts thee! Speak, but speak!—Aye, aye! thy silence, then, that @ voices thee. (*Aside*) Something shot from my dilated nostrils, he has inhaled it in his lungs. Starbuck now is mine; cannot oppose me now, without rebellion."

(Melville Chapter 36)

That doesn't translate well to comic form. People read comics to enjoy the words and art because they work in tandem, not because the words overwhelm the art or because the art does not 'fit' with the tone of the words. McCloud very precisely observed many comic creators assume "'great' art and 'great' writing will combine harmoniously by virtue of quality alone" (150). Definitely not true. My art changed in response to the text, and I found myself thinking about drawing in a textual mindset.

For this long stretch of dialogue, I chose to amplify the absurdity and abstractness of the speech and extend it across just two pages (imagine if I had really transcribed this faithfully...it would have been 20 at least). I interpreted "Strike through the mask!" as the strongest quote, or the quote Ahab would have said with the most energy, so I drew Ahab throwing his entire body into attempting to grasp a starburst on page 15. If you look very closely you will notice I tried to approximate what a whale eye looks like in the center. To be honest, I thought that Ishmael's

musings on the whale's eyes being on the side of its head was going to play a much bigger part, and thought that maybe Ahab would have struck the whale in the eye at the end. But no dice. This is what happens when I try to predict endings. Regardless, the whale eye was a detail I hope people still noticed.

Secondly, Ahab's very famous quote "I'd strike the sun if it insulted me" was a daunting one to illustrate because it had so many different interpretations. Matt Kish specifically chose to interpret it literally, showing a harpoon lunging for the sun in Illustration #157. But I had just done that on page 15 — Rats! These pages were made in order! — and so I decided to try another idea I had been tossing around in my mind. Ahab had been described with a scar running down his body resembling "that perpendicular seam sometimes made in the straight, lofty trunk of a great tree, when the upper lightning tearingly darts down it, and without wrenching a single twig, peels and grooves out the bark from top to bottom" (Melville Chapter 28). Because I had just watched a lot of movies with graphic body horror (*The Substance*, *Deadpool 2* (sort of), and part of *Bring Her Back*), I was drawn to the idea of depicting this scar as a splitting of Ahab's body. Rather than depicting the internal conflict that the mates display, I wanted to show Ahab's conviction in laying his mission out and exposing the cause of his malaise. So his body is totally exposed in a way, and the words (also shortened from his long monologue) can be attributed to certain body parts. "Talk not to me of blasphemy, man" is around his mouth, "I'd strike the sun if it insulted me" is around his heart (passion!), "Jealousy presiding over all creations" is around his stomach because envy and the stomach felt right, and "The crew...one and all" is around Ahab's peg leg to show that as long as the crew sees the carnage Moby Dick has wrecked on Ahab's body, they are in his thrall.

My Own Ahab-esque Monologue

It feels limiting to only talk about my fun and deliberate artistic choices even though I love fanning my own ego. The truth is that making this comic felt frustrating because it was very limited (and on a time crunch so I had no work-life balance). I struggled to plan out a lot of pages because there was so much excess in the narrative. Although I discussed cutting text down in 15 and 16, removing some of the crew's dialogue in page 8, and making a lot of the mate's emotions visual rather than textual, I felt as though I were bowdlerizing the sheer insanity of Ahab by changing the text in any way. Part of my attempt to rectify that unavoidable problem was drawing characters with enigmatic eyes. I floated between a few artistic styles when drafting characters — the character sketches you see in the beginning of Ahab and Ishmael on pages III and IV are the first pages I did — and really struggled with eyes, because to add too much detail gave too much away about the characters way too early. We know Ahab is leading the ship to its doom, but at this point in the narrative the characters have no idea what's happening except that their captain emerged from his cabin, paced around until sunset, and then started yelling at them. I wanted this comic to change for readers depending on where they were in the book, so seeing this comic as you were reading Chapter 36 for the first time would make Ahab feel more strange, and reading this comic as a die hard *Moby-Dick* fan would make Ahab feel more iconic, like I was illustrating his legacy rather than his personality. Nevertheless, adding too much detail to the eyes felt like too much of an imposition. You can see I was still settling on what to do when I was creating the first page (which only has his silhouette) because I had no idea how Ahab and other characters could convey different emotions for different readers. Eventually I decided to go back and erase all of the characters' pupils so it was never clear what or who they were looking at. The surrounding details, like the eye bags and crow's feet, are intended to be clues to readers,

but interpretations of these characters should change over time. If I drew something with a certain intention and readers interpreted it totally differently, that's even better. On that note, I did not base Ahab's appearance on Donald Trump at all . I wasn't keeping up with much of the outside world at this time, okay? I didn't want to look at pictures of Trump even if it was to draw Ahab. But it's incredible that people recognize the signs of fascism and mania that comes scarily naturally in modern politics in this comic.

When I say I didn't get out much while making this comic, I mean I have no idea how Matt Kish maintained a life making *Moby-Dick in Pictures*. But it gratified me to know that he really didn't. Matt Kish took on an insane amount of labor to create his book, and he very candidly talks about almost burning out. "I began to identify more and more with Ahab, obsessed with the idea of the White Whale and the task of finally finishing the art and slaying the monster...I lost sleep...I ate my meals in minutes and rushed back to the closet studio to keep drawing and painting...it started to devour every waking moment" (Kish XII). Terribly bleak and *very* accurate. I had not identified very closely with the scene and initially chose it because I believed it would make good art. The longer I went on, however, the more I became Ahab. Every day I thought about the comic. The days I didn't work on the comic (there was a mass exodus from campus to Montreal for a summer trip that seriously set me back) I felt like trash. I went to bed as the sun came up. I never got so many zits in my life. I didn't know people could run on such little sleep or such nutritionally empty food until I did. But I took immense pride in the comic despite my terrible artistic process because it felt so good to be obsessed with something. It gave me a purpose during a sometimes aimless and lazy summer term, and it made me realize that art is something that has to be practiced frequently or it will not come as easily — page 13 was oddly difficult to draw because I had just taken a break for one day.

Given the time I had and the complaining I did to everyone who would listen, I had to incorporate some personal flair into the work. Some of those details are:

- Making an extra panel just for the jumpscared steward on page 13
- “Woodcut” backgrounds on pages 5, 12 and 17 (just a few examples) — while I was heavily inspired by Barry Moser and Rockwell Kent, wood patterns and their random intricacies have been a motif in my art for years.
- Incorporating characters from other chapters: Pip on page 5 and Doughboy on page 13
- Queequeg’s finger has a series of triangle tattoos on it that very roughly approximate my name in Korean 김 지아. Shameless plug. Shameless.

Many of these are very silly and surface level Easter eggs, but they added some small joy to making the comic. In a way it felt like adding my own unnecessary details to a book already rife with them. If we don’t need the cetology chapters, we definitely don’t need to read a whole paper about a *Moby-Dick* comic adaptation. But some people (me, and people in the Summer Tomes class) are into weird and crazy things. And *Moby-Dick*, already a weird and crazy book, ends up being the perfect gateway to understanding comics, fandom, and mania.

Works Cited

Kish, Matt. *Moby-Dick In Pictures: One Drawing For Every Page*. 1st U.S. ed., Tin House Books, 2011.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*. Kitchen Sink Press, 1993.

Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick; Or, The Whale*. Melville Electronic Library, Accessed August 2025*

* While I used the Arion Press version illustrated by Barry Moser throughout the term, I read through an electronic version for ease of searching