

2018

Just A Coincidence? Whether Intention in Artistic Expression Alters Significance: An Analysis and Comparison of Herman Melville's Moby-Dick and Matt Kish's Moby-Dick in Pictures: One Drawing for Every Page

Brittany Barnhouse

University of Washington Tacoma, barnh@uw.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu/access>



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), [Illustration Commons](#), and the [Painting Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Barnhouse, Brittany (2018) "Just A Coincidence? Whether Intention in Artistic Expression Alters Significance: An Analysis and Comparison of Herman Melville's Moby-Dick and Matt Kish's Moby-Dick in Pictures: One Drawing for Every Page," *Access*: Interdisciplinary Journal of Student Research and Scholarship*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu/access/vol2/iss1/10>

This Undergraduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Teaching and Learning Center at UW Tacoma Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Access*: Interdisciplinary Journal of Student Research and Scholarship by an authorized editor of UW Tacoma Digital Commons.

Just A Coincidence? Whether Intention in Artistic Expression Alters Significance: An Analysis and Comparison of Herman Melville's Moby-Dick and Matt Kish's Moby-Dick in Pictures: One Drawing for Every Page

Cover Page Footnote

All artwork included with permission from Matt Kish. I gratefully acknowledge Dr. Ellen Bayer's enthusiasm for Moby-Dick and for learning as a whole, for which I may never have been so lucky to learn that obsessions could be both infectious and fun.

Abstract

Using examples from Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Matt Kish's *Moby-Dick in Pictures: One Drawing for Every Page*, this paper explores how intention and coincidence contribute to perception of literature and art. There are too many patterns and details for certain aspects of *Moby-Dick* to be just a coincidence, and when the novel is viewed with this in mind, it changes the reader's relationship with the text and subsequently inspired artwork. By questioning the relationship with coincidence and intention as it relates to truth in storytelling and art, the reader by extension begins to question the very same in their own lives.

Key words: Moby-Dick, Moby Dick, American Literature, Melville, Intention, Matt Kish

Just A Coincidence? Whether Intention in Artistic Expression Alters Significance

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* has inspired a tsunami of art and an unquenchable thirst for its secrets since resurfacing decades after original publication. The book spends most of its pages on details that seem mundane enough that publishers consider them worth exclusion in some editions—a move that, based on Melville's later works and letters to friends, would likely be considered sacrilege by the author himself. That is to say, every piece of *Moby-Dick* serves a purpose and to assume the book would be better off with all but the linear, most adventurous parts stripped out of it, is to miss the point entirely. Matt Kish, in his own best of a book, *Moby-Dick in Pictures: One Drawing for Every Page*, pays homage to Melville by responding to each page of *Moby-Dick* with his own piece of art—even the “boring” parts. Through references to the external, concrete world, and an experimentation with medium in their respective artforms, Herman Melville and Matt Kish invite the observer to examine whether truth is a product of coincidence or intention, and whether the distinction matters in the end.

Kish's images are often somewhat abstract, and when the audience considers a single image at a time, it can be difficult to tell what is accidental or intentional, or which shape corresponds with each character. The observer's first impression is a sense of disorientation. In the very first image, for example, we are presented with the word “Ishmael” descending from the heavens and hovering over what appears to be a whale—a round, blue-gray blob with large eyes and perhaps a dorsal fin

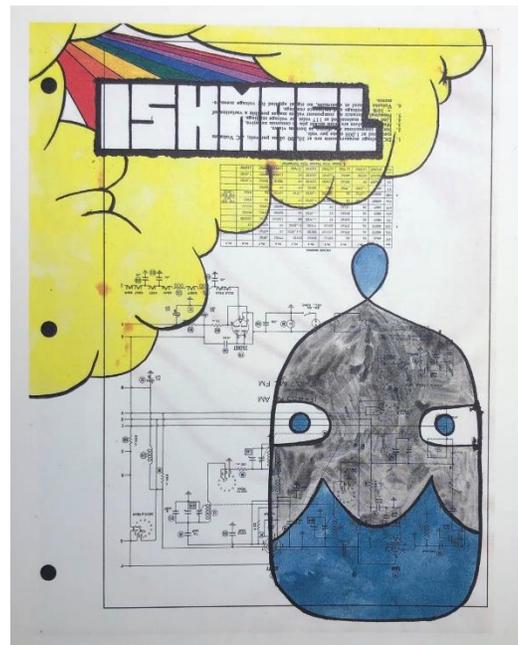


Figure 1. 1 *Call me Ishmael*. Colored pencil and ink on found paper. 8.5" x 11" 08/05/09.

(Kish, fig 1). It would make sense for the image to be a whale given the name of the book and general theme, and it certainly doesn't *look* like a human, but it isn't until image 91 (Kish, fig. 2) that the observer is given more concrete evidence that this shape is in fact Ishmael. In the same vein, the first introduction to Ahab is a shadowy figure found within 77 (Kish, fig. 3), an image that lines up with Ishmael's imagined idea of who

Ahab might be: a shadowy, mostly featureless, unknown man. We get a more detailed, fleshed-out Ahab in image 117 (Kish, fig. 4 and 5), and learn that the color red, angry eyes, and a lightning-shaped scar represent him. Sometimes characters are so subtly represented, especially when first introduced, that we are initially led to believe that the shapes and colors are chosen completely at random. It isn't until the repetition becomes more apparent that we start to feel more oriented within the artwork and feel more confident about what is being shown to us. It is through these consistencies that we begin to see which pieces are a conscious decision made by Kish.



Figure 2. 91 *But we had not gone perhaps above a hundred yards, when chancing to turn a corner, and looking back as I did so, who should be seen but Elijah following us, though at a distance.* Ink and marker on found paper. 7.75" x 11" 11/29/09

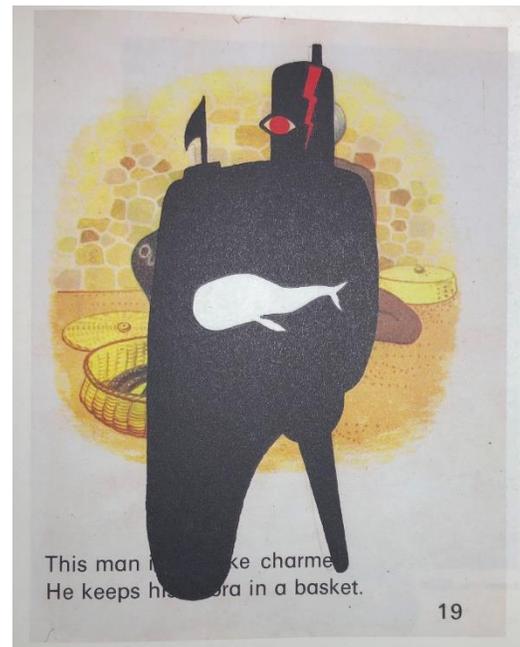


Figure 3. 77 *But I had not proceeded far, when I began to bethink me that the captain with whom I was to sail yet remained unseen by me...* Acrylic paint and ink on found paper. 6" x 7.75" 11/18/09

Since Kish's images are created as a direct response to the pages of the novel, it should come as no surprise that *Moby-Dick* begins in an equally mysterious way regarding the identity of its main character. The reader is left with the curious question of who the narrator is early on when he says, "Call me Ishmael" (Melville 19). Not "I am Ishmael" or "my name is Ishmael." The implication is that his name may not necessarily be Ishmael at all, but rather what he expects to be called, and as a consequence, the reader is left wondering not only who this man is, but what secrets he may be keeping to himself, and why. If the narrator's identity is to remain unknown, why should we trust what he has to say, and how do we know what is fact or fiction? It becomes evident through the interaction between Ishmael and Captain Peleg that other characters also refer to the narrator as Ishmael, however, when Queequeg is signed up for a lay as "Quohog" (Melville 107) we see that within the context of the world that this text is set in, their names, ultimately, aren't that important to anyone on board. If the other characters don't care, should it matter to the reader? Since the narrator's name is chosen by the narrator himself, we are also left

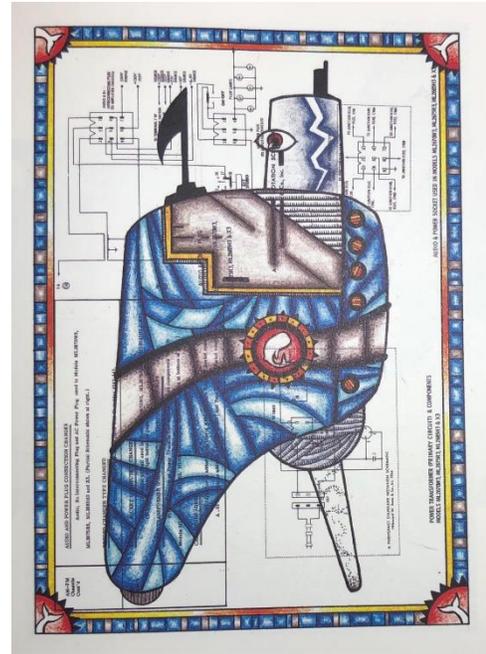


Figure 4. 117 Reality outran apprehension; Captain Ahab stood upon his quarter-deck. Colored pencil and ink on found paper. 7.75" x 11" 12/29/09



Figure 5. 161 "I am madness maddened!" ink on found paper. 8.5" x 10.5" 02/12/10

wondering why Ishmael—why *this* name—is significant. If Ishmael chose this name, how many of the other names within the book are created by him?

Many characters' names in *Moby-Dick* have Biblical counterparts aside from Ishmael: Ahab, Elijah, and Gabriel, for example. There are even whaling ships called the Virgin, and Rachel. Considering the time period in which *Moby-Dick* was written and Melville lived, it is likely the original audience would have been familiar with these names in their original context. Even today, these Biblical names, by nature of their familiarity, add a level of expectation regarding the identity of these characters, what they might do, or what might happen to them. When such expectations align, we are left wondering if their fate was already decided, and by extension, whether the characters, or we ourselves, have free will at all. Our own names are rarely chosen by us and in fact, often carry with them social expectations or cultural weight—how much of personality and behavior is dictated by factors other than our own conscious direction? Is somebody writing our story, and if so, who? When the characters in *Moby-Dick* don't align with their Biblical counterparts, we are left wondering what else in the novel is false prophecy, or how we might be misled next as the text defies expectations of characters' lives, experience, and knowledge.

It could be that Melville (or Ishmael) chose names simply because he liked the sound of them, except that some of the characters do in fact match their Biblical counterparts too well to be randomly assigned (Elijah, for example, seems a prophet regardless of the text in which he exists). Are the underlying shapes associated with Kish's images full of symbolic meaning or simply chosen for aesthetics? Is Ishmael rounded and soft, or Ahab broad and rigid, as a reflection of their character? In *Moby-Dick*, Captain Peleg points out to Ishmael the folly of ascribing too much significance to the connection between Captain Ahab and the Biblical king

who shares his namesake, stating plainly, “Captain Ahab did not name himself” (Melville 97) and when it comes to the name as part of a prophecy, simply that, “It’s a lie” (Melville 98). Therefore, the names are both intentional, but not necessarily revelatory about the characters themselves, leading the audience to question why they are chosen at all. If not to elicit a curiosity about what is happening within the text, then what? The Christian connections to characters within *Moby-Dick* are tenuous and there are multiple references to other mythological Roman and Greek deities throughout the text, causing the reader to turn a critical eye on Christianity itself. If Aries was once worshipped as devoutly as Christ, what makes one real, or false? How can we know?

Ishmael implies that it is acceptable to have doubts about religious doctrine, saying, “Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye” (Melville 391). The novel and Ishmael’s narrative within, was published at a time when huge paradigm shifts were happening: this is the same century in which the term “dinosaur” was first coined, it is before modern use of electricity (the incandescent lightbulb wouldn’t make its way into homes until after Melville’s death), and several years before Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. Ishmael does not state that control by the church, or that the Christian paradigm should be cast aside entirely, but instead suggests that it is acceptable to examine reality and question what has always been known to be true. He invites his audience, instead, to come to their own conclusions.

In order to illustrate this point, Ishmael describes the eye placement on a sperm whale’s head, stating, “the whale, therefore, must see one distinct picture on this side, and another distinct picture on that side; while all between must be profound darkness and nothingness to him” (Melville 346). He implies that it’s possible to hold two seemingly opposing views

simultaneously, but to attempt to force them together—to marry the uncertainties of religious thought with scientific thought, or mortality against immortality—is really the great, maddening unknown. The knowledge of echolocation in toothed whales today only adds an extra layer to a metaphor that would not have been available to a reader when the book was first published; the reality is that the area between the eyes of a sperm whale is not a vast, profound darkness, but rather a three dimensional, highly detailed image resulting from a complex language system within the whale’s brain. Similarly, an observer can look at each of Kish’s images separately, but to hold them all as one collective unit provides insight, bringing to the forefront how intention and coincidence intermingle to create a mysterious whole. Ishmael speaks with so much authority on certain topics, and yet, when set against modern technology and science—such as knowing in hindsight how a sperm whale’s brain functions—we are forced to ask exactly what parts of the novel (or history) get carried forward and taken as fact without being questioned.

Moby-Dick, especially in a modern context, seems to demand that questions be asked of both it and the time period in which it is written. Are we paying enough attention to examine ourselves and determine who is deciding our own actions and values? Can we know more, and should we do more about what we know?

How much meaning do we dare create for ourselves?

Ishmael is not the only one to acknowledge the

expectations society places on a curious mind. Ahab,

for example, says, “Ahab never thinks; he only feels, feels; *that’s* tingling enough for mortal

man! God only has that right and privilege” (Melville 574). The reader is left wondering what’s

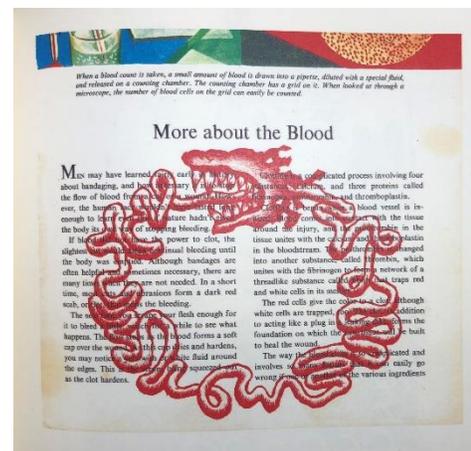


Figure 6. 293 *They viciously snapped, not only at each other’s disembowelments, but like flexible bows, bent round, and bit their own; till those entrails seemed swallowed over and over again by the same mouth, to be oppositely voided by the gaping wound.* Ballpoint pen on found paper. 8” x 7.75” 06/28/10

so wrong about thinking or what the consequences of committing a *thought* might be. Knowledge, or Truth, it seems, comes at a cost, which Ishmael warns against when comparing a ship hoisting up whales as balanced between Locke and Kant: “Oh, ye foolish! throw all these thunderheads overboard, and then you will float light and right” (345). In other words, ignorance is bliss and any attempts to understand the conflicting nature of the world, can be a heavy a burden.

One might go as mad as Ahab when trying to determine whether the found paper used in several of Kish’s images were serendipitous or purposefully paired. Most of the base paper used for the artwork seems irrelevant, but others have a sense of being too perfect not to have been intentional. One example is image 293 (Kish, fig. 6), where the featured quote about a wound is paired with a red, intestinal dragon-like creature seeming to consume itself. The found paper it is placed on, however, says “More about the Blood” and appears to be a description of red cells, bandaging, and clots. Another example can be found in image 307 (Kish, fig. 7), with the words “THE ASCENT OF MAN” floating above the tossed harpooner drawn in ink by Kish. Other examples still, include image 267 (Kish, fig. 8) with the artwork showing a whale with scrimshaw drawings on its teeth, and the found paper stating, “THE DICTIONARY OF

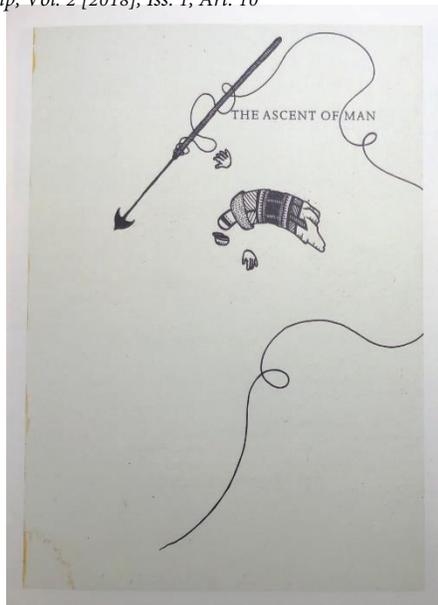


Figure 7. 307 *Next instant, the luckless mate, so full of furious life, was smitten bodily into the air, and making a long arc in his descent, fell into the sea at a distance of about fifty yards. Not a chip of the boat was harmed, nor a hair of any oarsman’s head; but the mate for ever sank.* Ink on found paper. 7” x 9.5” 07/11/10

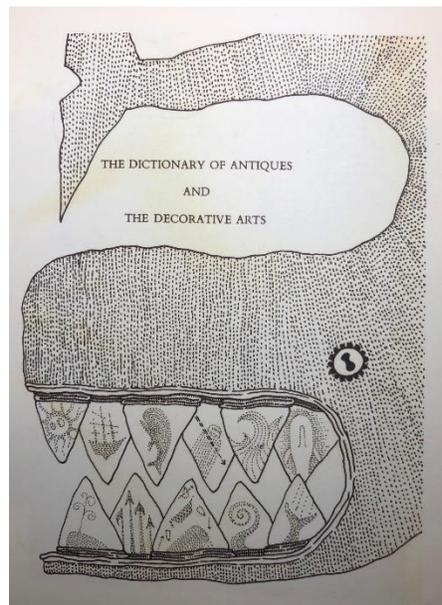


Figure 8. 267 *Yea; foolish mortals, Noah’s flood is not yet subsided; two thirds of the fair world it yet covers.* Acrylic paint on found paper. 7.75” x 10.25” 06/03/10 paper. 6” x 7.75” 11/18/09

ANTIQUES AND THE DECORATIVE ARTS” or image 263 (Kish, fig. 9) in which what appears to be waves flowing across the page, allow just the edge of the found paper to peek out and say, “Waves of the Sea.” The vast majority of the artwork and found pages are not related, however, the observer is drawn in when they line up—they seem to hold a greater significance. We’re left wondering whether Fate brought the matching found paper together with the quotes from *Moby-Dick*, or whether Kish set the found paper aside, knowing it would be needed later. The observer is left

wondering what came first: the quote or the found paper? Is the observer noticing an intelligent design, discovering clues, placed there by the artwork’s creator, or assigning significance to an accident? There is still an element of coincidence—the paper is *found*, after all—but does the distinction diminish the value of the image in any way or add to it?

Kish’s images are self-aware to a degree, in the same way that the narration in *Moby-Dick* can make the reader question whether Melville himself is peeking through the text at them. Kish’s image 238 (Kish, fig. 10) provides a definition of expressive art with a focus on the “psychological response of the viewer,” though the artwork itself is about the character Steelkilt. This image in particular is not just artwork on top of found paper, but cut out definitions placed on top of the artwork, encouraging the reader to



Figure 9. 263 Throughout the Pacific, and also in Nantucket, and New Bedford, and Sag Harbor, you will come across lively sketches of whales and whaling-scenes, graven by the fishermen themselves on Sperm Whale-teeth... Ink and marker on found paper. 8" x 10.5" 05/30/10

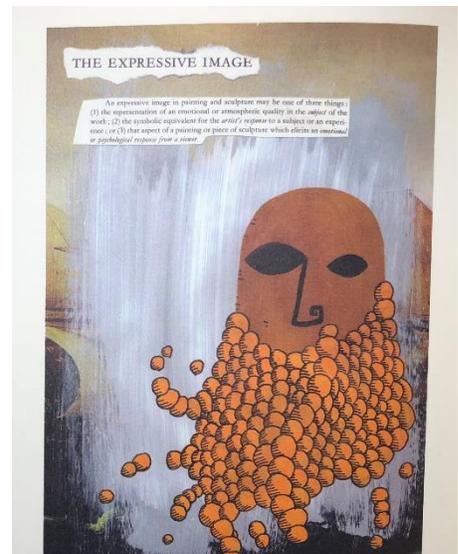


Figure 10. 238 "...at all events Steelkilt was a tall and noble animal with a head like a Roman, and a flowing golden beard like the tasseled housings of your last viceroy's snorting charger..." Acrylic paint, collage and ink on found paper. 7.75" x 11" 05/08/10

question how the artwork makes them feel. This feels like Kish speaking to the observer through the artwork as a reminder to enjoy the work, even when consumed cerebrally by it. The most obviously self-aware image, 350 (Kish, fig. 11), jolts the reader right out of the narrative by presenting the reader with a meta-combination of elements. One of many from *Moby-Dick* that make the reader feel as though Melville is present within the text, the accompanied quote comes from Ishmael, who says, “There are some enterprises in which a careful disorderliness is the true method” (Melville 378). The

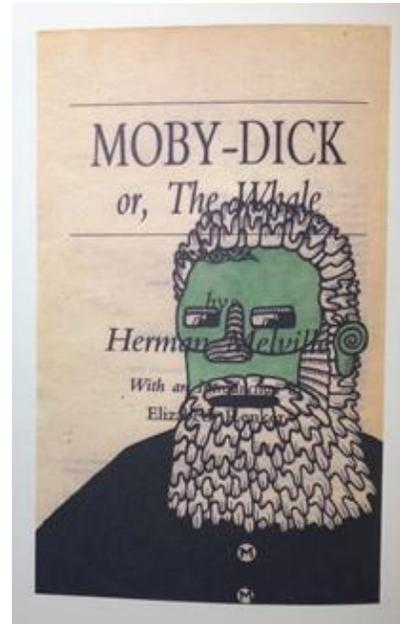


Figure 11. 350 *There are some enterprises in which a careful disorderliness is the true method.* Ink and marker on found paper. 4" x 6.75" 08/14/10

artwork from Kish, by comparison, contains a character we haven't seen in previous pages, but anyone who has seen a portrait of Herman Melville would recognize as the author himself. The added bonus is that the found paper is the cover page of *Moby-Dick or, The Whale*. The gut feeling is that all pieces put together in this particular image were clearly intentional. The quote from Ishmael (or perhaps Melville, because who exactly is our narrator, anyway?) also lends itself to the way in which the novel is constructed: in many seemingly unrelated parts. There are chapters presented in play format, reminding us that each page is being orchestrated and carefully put together. There are moments where Ishmael retells conversations he wouldn't have been present for, making the reader wonder who he is, or how he could know the things he knows. The many small parts don't make much sense unless the reader allows themselves to see both separately, and simultaneously. *Moby-Dick* is a maze with multiple paths that take the reader on numerous journeys, but consistently, it is one that keeps the reader on their toes.

Each reading, reader, or time period in which *Moby-Dick* is rifled through has the potential to supply new meaning to the book. Kish's artwork provides insight in the form of consistency and a combination of senses, but is still only one of many responses and interpretations of *Moby-Dick*. Ishmael tells us, "Oh! many are the Fin-Backs, and many are the Derricks my friend" (Melville 378). In a way, he's letting us know that many of us will head in the wrong direction, or interpret the text in the wrong way, but that that's nothing to fret over. It's an adventure all the same. Melville seems to step through the page even earlier, to say, "[some] might scout at Moby Dick as a monstrous fable, or still worse and more detestable, a hideous and intolerable allegory" (Melville 222). Though Ishmael (and by extension, Melville) seems to be playing a little with the reader here, it can also be seen as a direct notice that this book is more than *just* a fable or allegory (perhaps it's a lesson). We know from the inconsistencies of the characters and their Biblical counterparts that *Moby-Dick* is not comprised entirely of one-for-one parallels. In fact, we aren't even sure what their names are, since they don't seem to matter, and are chosen or made up by the narrator anyway. Though aspects of the novel could be viewed as an allegory, it is so much more than that. It is deliberate in its disorderliness. It is both serendipitous and conscious.

Like Ahab, we can never know the answers, and trying to grasp too firmly for concrete answers is a weighty risk. *Moby-Dick* is a combination of myth and fact, or the difference between objective history and personal truth. Matt Kish and Herman Melville provide works of art that engage a critical thought process that extends beyond the works themselves, inviting the observer to examine whether truth is a product of coincidence or intention, and whether the distinction matters in the end. If let loose, such a critical thought process begins to demand answers and threaten to turn in on itself in a way that makes the reader question their own

perceptions of what is true, or real. The ultimate takeaway can be found when Ishmael states, “if you can’t get nothing better out of the world, get a good dinner out of it, at least” (Melville 462). In other words, readers can’t expect to know everything, or to nail everything down, but they can still enjoy it for what it is. Enjoy the moments that seem to line up too perfectly, but don’t get swept up by them either.

Works Cited

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

Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick, or, The Whale*. Signet Classic, 2013.