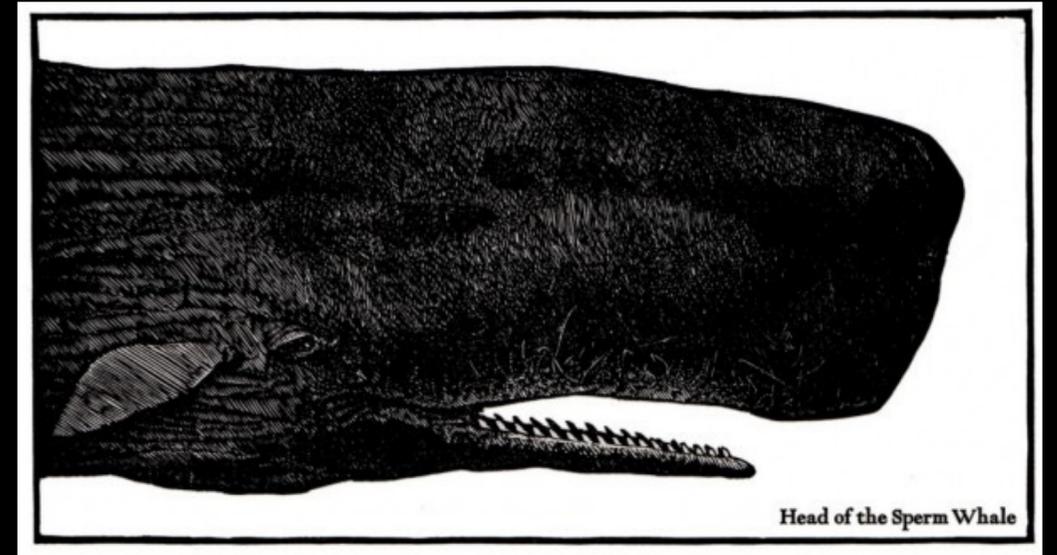


Head of the Sperm Whale



Head of the Sperm Whale

Moby-Dick

ECL 522: American Lit 1800-1860

Professor Jessica Pressman

Fall 2025

Day 17: Chapters 74-86



October 29

Arts & Letters

Department of English and Comparative Literature

Q&A + OPEN HOUSE

Join ECL faculty & learn strategies for grad student success. Get your questions answered! Room AL-266.

12:00-1:00 PM

Meet + mix with ECL faculty, students, and organizations. Learn about 2026 courses. Get free candy! A&L Floor 2.

1:00-2:00 PM

Interested in tabling? Contact rporath@sdsu.edu.



SDSU Department of English & Comparative Literature

2h · 🌐



Congrats to English and Comparative Literature major, Jeanne Taylor, whose short film "Yeux" was selected for the National PBS Fine Cut Film Festival! 🙌 "Yeux" was nationally broadcasted on October 22, but you can also watch the film here: [https://www.pbs.org/video/yeux/...](https://www.pbs.org/video/yeux/) See more

SDSU Student Film “YEUX” Selected for National PBS Broadcast

By **Felicity Desuasido**

Thursday, October 2, 2025

Share   



Documentary still from "YEUX" (Courtesy of Jeanne Taylor)

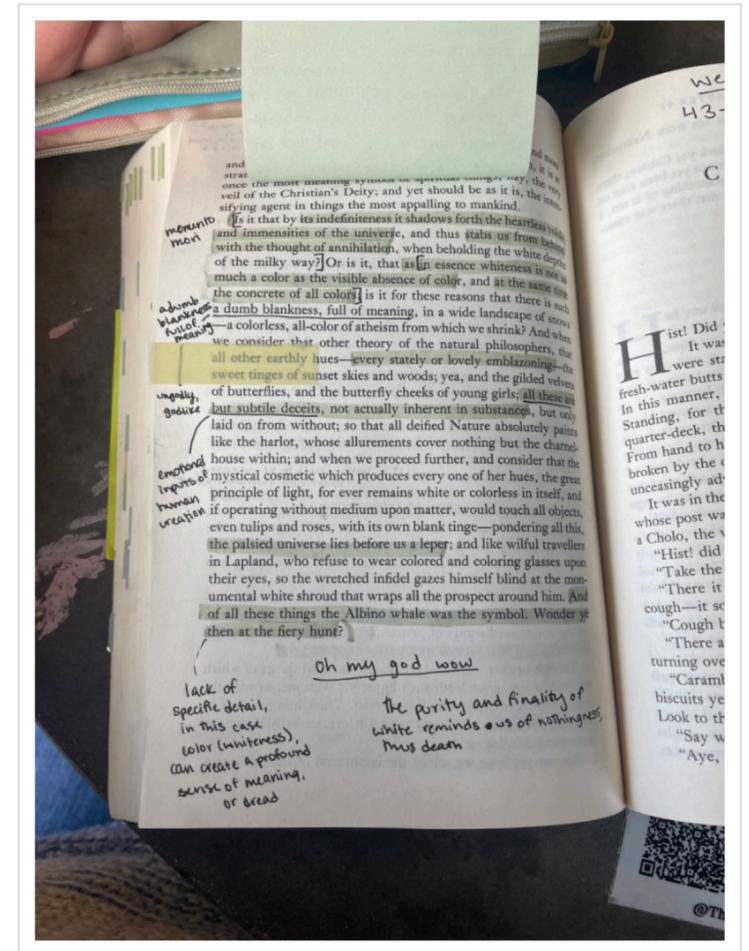
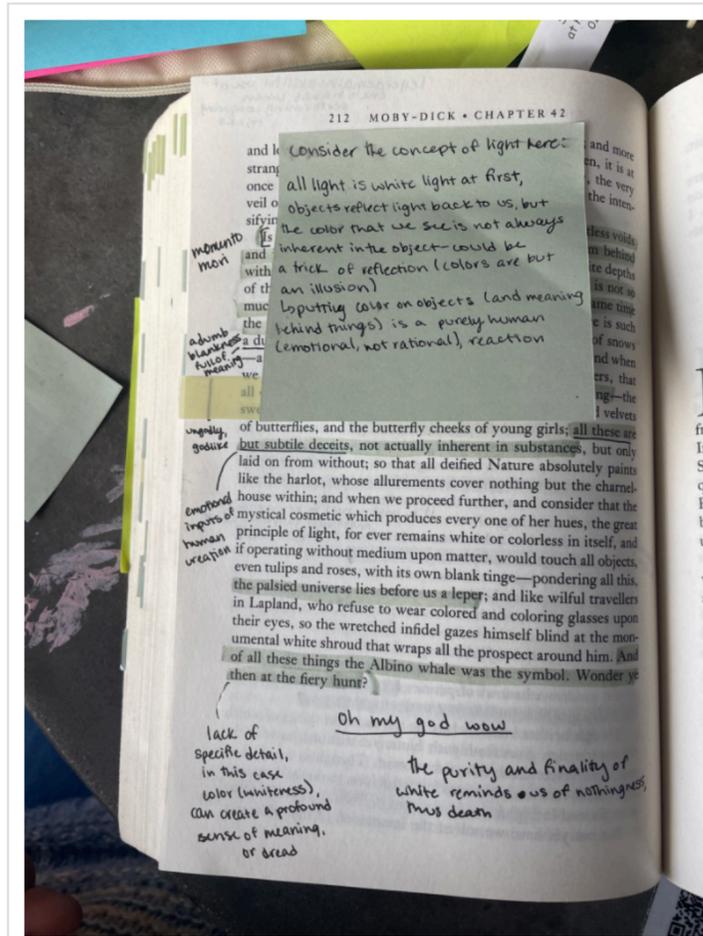
ADMIN

- PUSHING BACK deadline for Essay 2.
- **Revisions to Essay 1 due 11/9; Essay 2 due 11/16!**
- Check READING SCHEDULE for peer review of thesis statements for Essay 2
- Thursday: optional read of my personal-critical essay on Breastfeeding in/ and MD & HALLOWEEN COSTUMES!

Annotation!

ALYSSA: My favorite part of my copy is its evolution. In the beginning, my annotations were underlines, hearts, and different variations of “oh my god” or “wow.” Now, it’s a complete analysis, connections to other chapters, or thought-out stream of consciousness spouts.

Posted on [October 26, 2025](#) by [Alyssa Godwin](#)



I started annotating my copy of *Moby Dick* as soon as I got it, using it as a notebook for our class discussions. Even before we started reading the actual text, I used the blank, or mostly blank, pages at the beginning of the edition to take notes on the historical context and Melville's background. I'm reminded at every turn of a page that this novel is, in many ways, a preservation of existence, thought, and experience. It's because of this that my edition is marked up in every way, from highlighter to pen to various color-coded tabs.

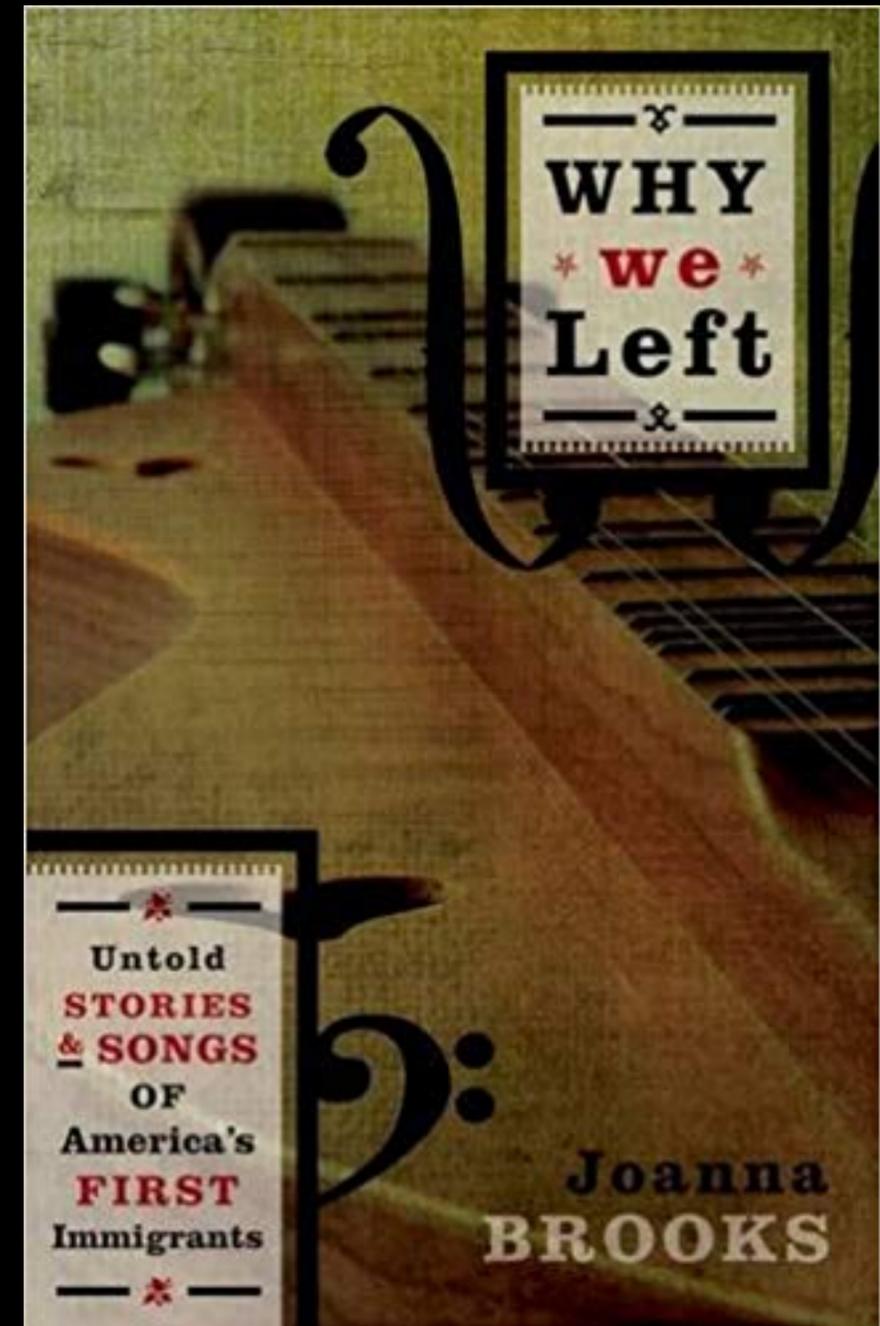
Queequeg's Beaver Hat



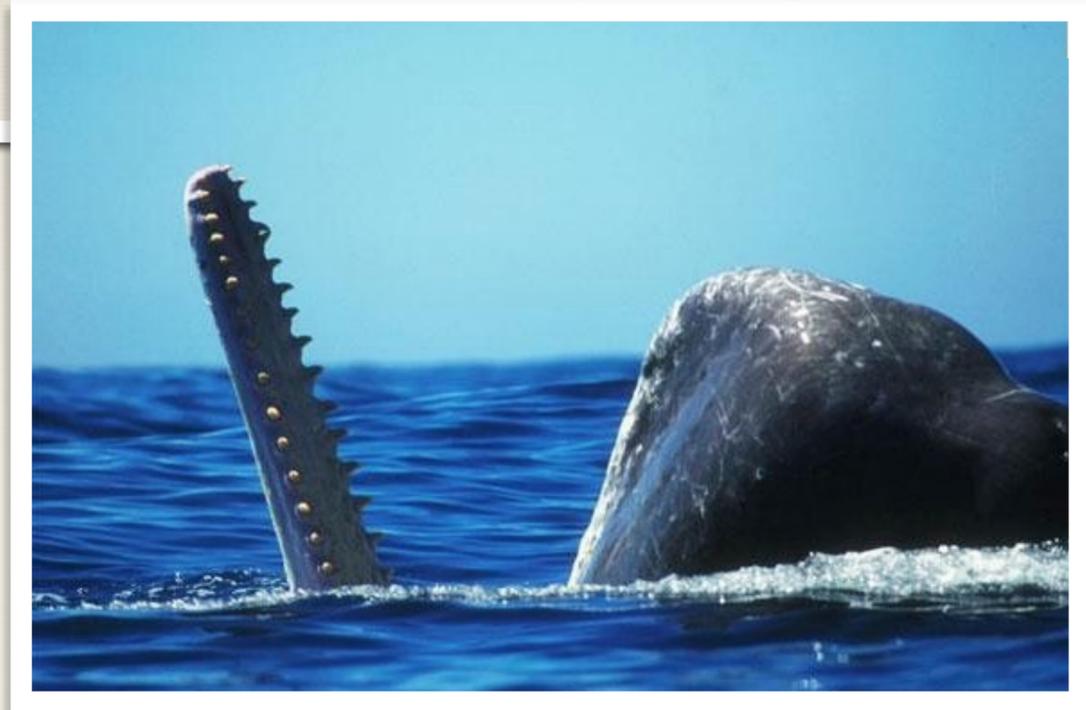
the fur trade “served as the first economic engine of British North American colonialism” (Brooks, 83)

Felted beaver hats= 17-mid-19th Century trend. The establishment of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1670 was primarily driven by the quest for raw materials, specifically beaver fur.

Beaver fur gave way to silk.



The Sperm Whale



-the sperm whale was so named because of the milky fluid contained in its head, which resembled semen

-biggest brain of any creature ever alive, weighing 19 pounds

-Sperm whales- the world's deepest-diving animals— they can go down to 10K feet

Sperm Whales communication

“Sperm whales have the most complex structure of any animal other than man” (75)

- They lack a voice box

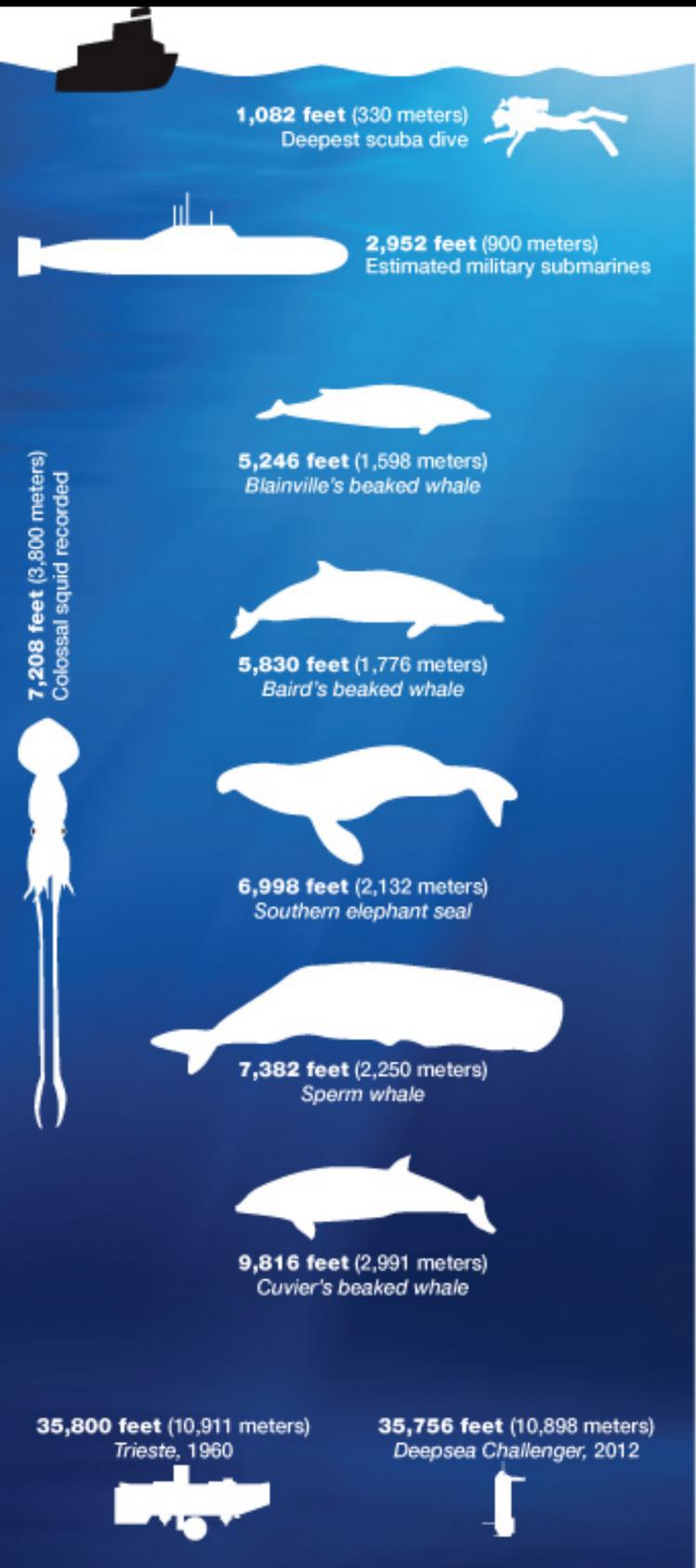
- their clicks can be heard for miles, important for navigation and communication

Sperm whales produce 4 distinct vocalization patterns: normal clicks, creaks, codas, slow clicks

- deep water conducts noise

- they are the loudest animals on Earth





Sperm Whales

They can detect a ten inch long squid at a distance more than a 1000 feet and a human from more than a mile away.
“Sperm whales’ echolocation is the most precise and powerful form of biosonar ever discovered” (172)

-James Nestor, *The Deep: Freediving, Renegade Science, and What the Ocean Tells us about Ourselves* (Harper Collins, 2014)



Scale



Sperm Whale oil & industry

“The Revolutionary War was fueled by sperm whale oil” (Nestor, 180)

-Sperm whale oil was good for everything from streetlights to lighthouses, it made top quality candles, cosmetics, machine lubricants and waterproofing agents...

The 1830s, more than 350 ships and 10K sailors were hunting sperm whales.

20 years later, those numbers would double.

Nantucket was processing more than 5K sperm whale corpses a year and reaping upwards of 12 million gallons of oil. (A single whale could yield 500 or more gallons of spermaceti)



Whaling & its demise

-Whaling: “it was also the first international industry dominated by the United States” (40)

1840s= Melville and his shipmates were amongst the last men to hunt whales by drawing close to the animal, piercing it with a harpoon (40)

-—Philip Hoare, *Leviathan, Or, The Whale* (Fourth Estate, 2008)

The Novel as Nostalgia/Archive to Whaling

-since Nantucket in 1850 was past its prime, there is a nostalgic quality to Melville's writing

“Instead of writing history, Melville is forging an American mythology” (20)
—Why Read Moby-Dick?

Nathaniel Philbrick, *Why Read Moby Dick?* (Viking, 2011)

Whaling and Slavery

- the ships were open to blacks and Indians and others shut out of trades closer to home;
- many whalers were really just boys

- 1838 Frederick Douglass escaped Baltimore as a sailor. Arrived in New Bedford. Lived and worked there for 4 years

In the 18th and 19th C whaling and slavery, whaling and slavery co-existed as lucrative, exploitative, transoceanic industries



1850-1851

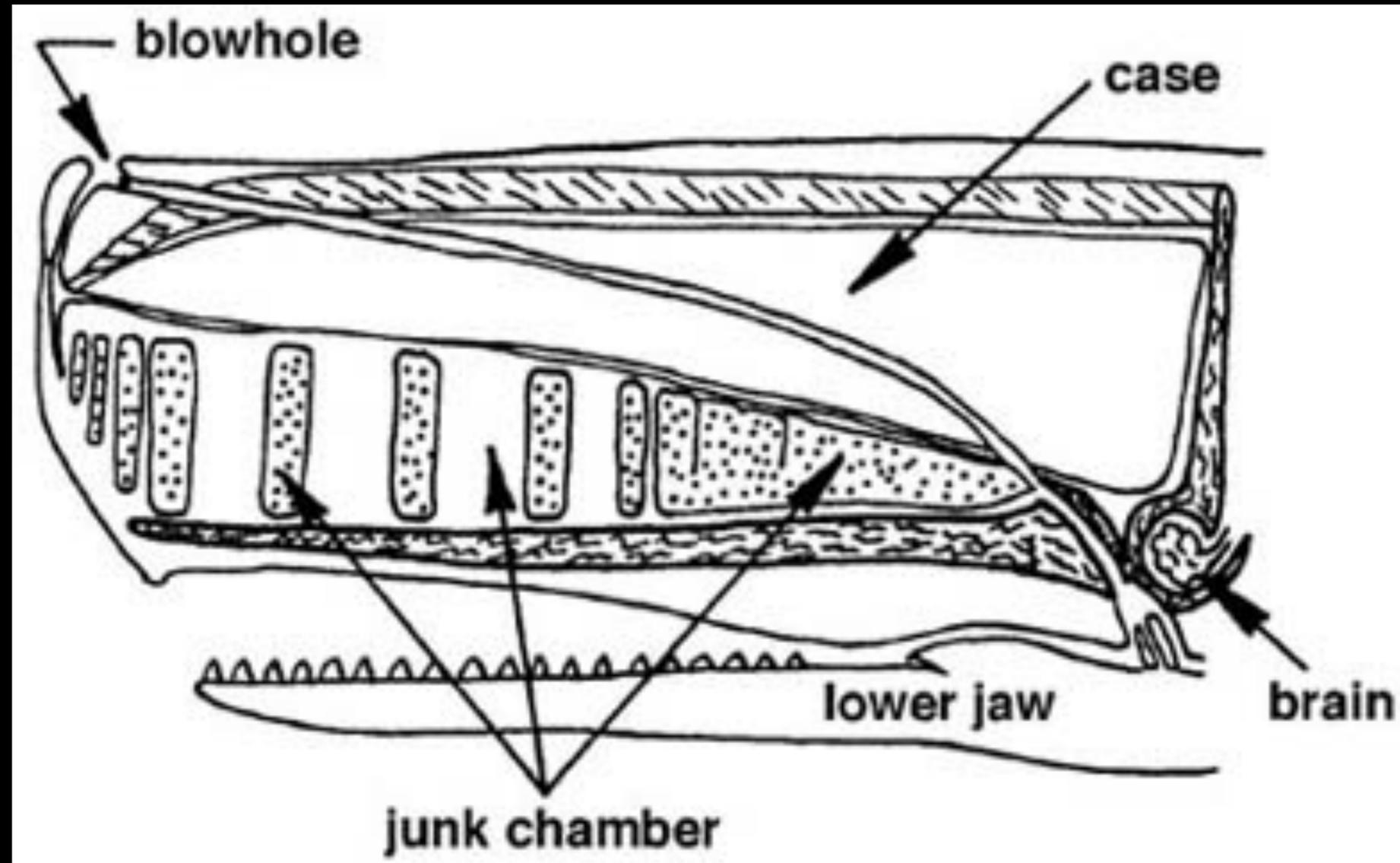
- * **Compromise of 1850:** “By 1850 sectional disagreements related to slavery were straining the bonds of union between the North and South. These tensions became especially critical when Congress began to consider whether western lands acquired after the Mexican-American War would permit slavery. In 1849, California requested permission to enter the Union as a "free state" – meaning one where slavery was banned. Adding more "free state" senators to Congress would destroy the balance between "slave" and "free" states that had existed since the [Missouri Compromise](#) of 1820....But one aspect of the compromise – a strengthened fugitive slave act – soon began to threaten sectional peace.
—<https://www.archives.gov/>
- * **Missouri Compromise of 1820:** This legislation admitted Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a non-slave state at the same time, so as not to upset the balance between slave and free states in the nation. It also outlawed slavery above the 36° 30' latitude line in the remainder of the Louisiana Territory.
- * **Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854):** Officially titled "An Act to Organize the Territories of Nebraska and Kansas," this act repealed the Missouri Compromise, which had outlawed slavery above the 36°30' latitude in the Louisiana territories, and reopened the national struggle over slavery in the western territories.
- * **Dred Scott decision (1857):** Officially titled "An Act to Organize the Territories of Nebraska and Kansas," this act repealed the Missouri Compromise, which had outlawed slavery above the 36°30' latitude in the Louisiana territories, and reopened the national struggle over slavery in the western territories. Dred Scott (enslaved man) sued for freedom after living in Western state — lost.

Discussion

- What is captivating you? Surprising you? Concerning you?
- Places to pause and dive in?



Ch. 74



From your blogs

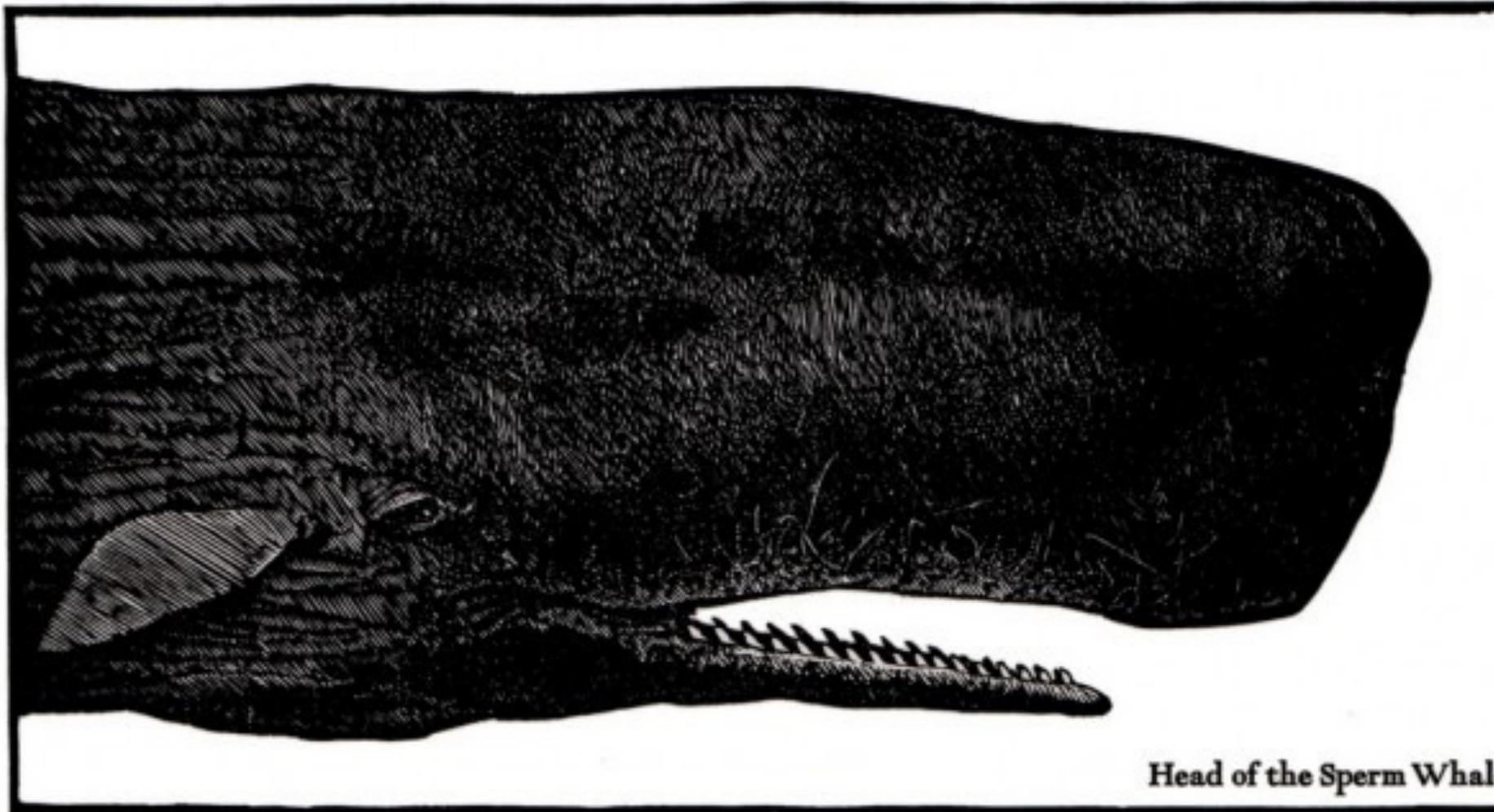
- LIZ: Ishmael stating that “the Sperm Whale has no tongue” becomes a metaphor for the silence of nature. Whales can’t “speak” their truth, every human attempt to interpret it becomes an act of projection. Melville turns this into a critique of arrogance, the desire to know and name the environment around us as a form of domination.

The dialectic

northern right whale
(*Eubalaena glacialis*)
length up to 18 m (59 ft)



© 2010 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.



Head of the Sperm Whale

Ch. 77: The Great Heidelberg Tun

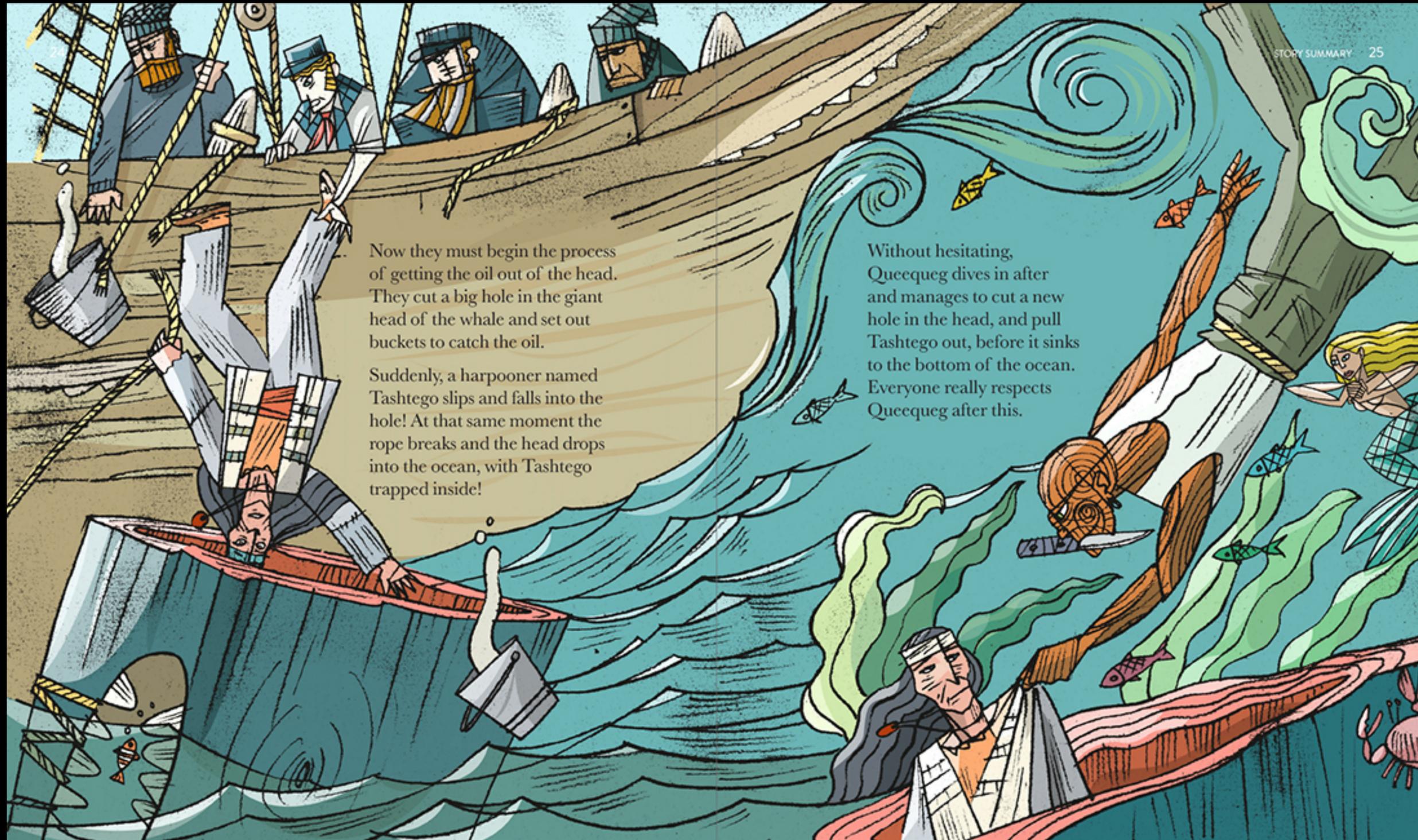
- A wine vat



From your blogs

- **AURORA:** By linking comprehension to dissection, Melville transforms the very physical and almost brutal act of cutting into an intellectual one. To “know something of the curious internal structure” is to recognize the layered complexity of every object and idea that is presented to the reader in the novel. **The whale, the Pequod, and even Ishmael’s narrative share the same architecture. They are massive, mysterious, and full of unseen parts that demand exploration and much deeper thought.** Through this, Moby-Dick becomes a kind of living anatomy, a work that invites readers to participate in its own operation, continually digging deeper for a truth that resists full capture.

Ch. 78: The Cistern



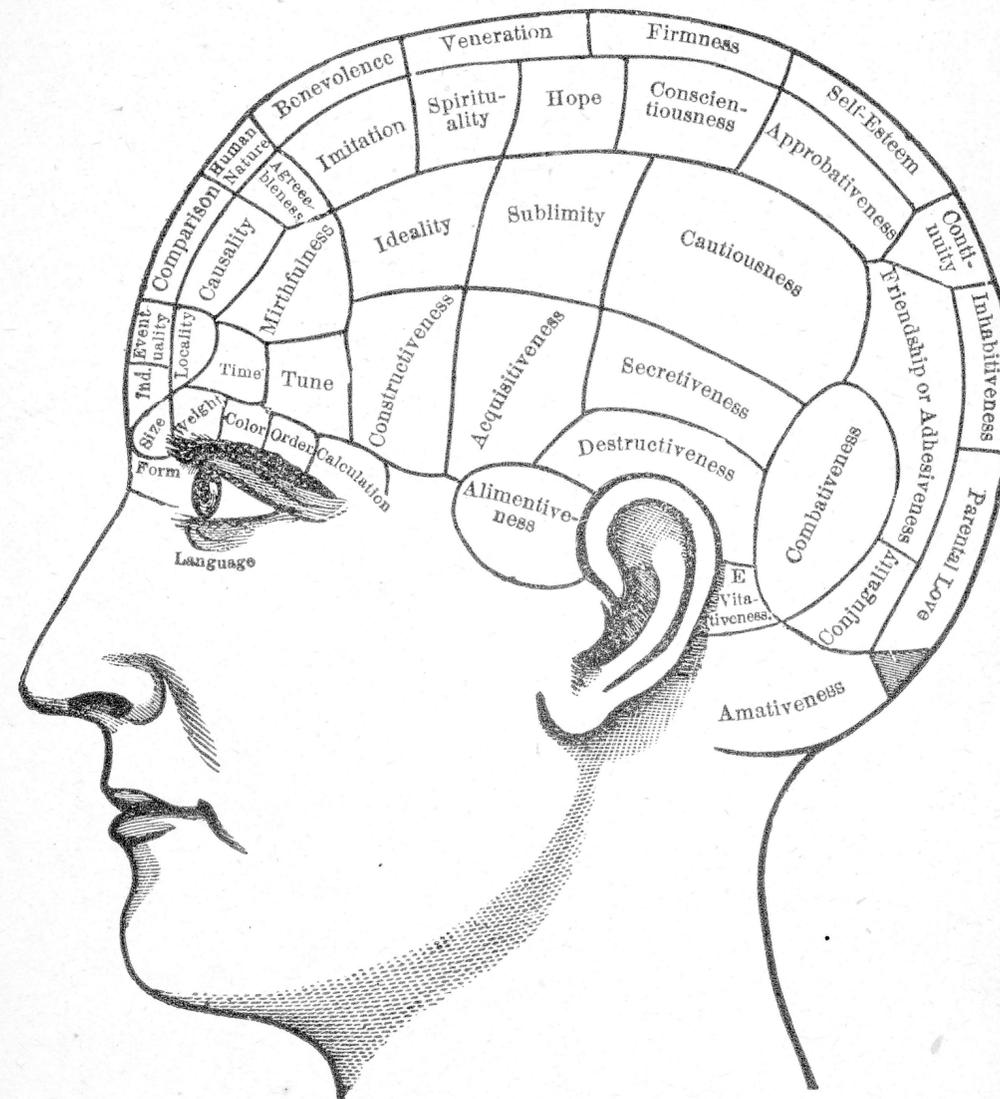
Now they must begin the process of getting the oil out of the head. They cut a big hole in the giant head of the whale and set out buckets to catch the oil.

Suddenly, a harpooner named Tashtego slips and falls into the hole! At that same moment the rope breaks and the head drops into the ocean, with Tashtego trapped inside!

Without hesitating, Queequeg dives in after and manages to cut a new hole in the head, and pull Tashtego out, before it sinks to the bottom of the ocean. Everyone really respects Queequeg after this.

Ch. 79: The Prairie

No. 7, Destructiveness—Executiveness; thoroughness and severity. *Excess*: Cruelty; vindictiveness. *Deficiency*: Inefficiency; a lack of fortitude under trial.



PHRENOLOGICAL HEAD.

THIS IS REGARDED AS THE MOST CORRECT INDICATION OF THE POSITION OF THE PHRENOLOGICAL ORGANS AND THEIR RELATIVE SIZE AND FORM.

No. 8, Alimentiveness—Desire for food; appetite. *Excess*: Gluttony-Intemperance. *Deficiency*: Want of appetite; indifference in regard to food.

Ch. 79: “The Prairie”- phenomenology

- * “To scan the lines of his face, or feel the bumps on the head of this leviathan; this is a thing which no physiognomist or phrenologist has as yet undertaken....Therefore, though I am but ill qualified for a pioneer, in the application of these two semi-sciences to the whale, I will do my endeavour. I try all things; I achieve what I can.” (378)

Ch. 79: “The Prairie”- Rosetta Stone

- * “Champollion deciphered the wrinkled granite hieroglyphics. But there is no Champollion to decipher the Egypt of every man’s and every being’s face. Physiognomy, like every other human science, is but a passing fable. If then, Sir William Jones, who read in thirty languages, could not read the simplest peasant’s face in its profounder and more subtle meanings, how may unlettered Ishmael hope to read the awful Chaldee of the sperm whale’s brow? I but put that brow before you. Read it if you can.” (380)

Rosetta Stone (Ch. 79)

- * Discovered 1799
- * Greek, Egyptian hieroglyphics, Egyptian demotic,
- * 2,000 BC
- * key to decoding Egyptian hieroglyphics (Jean-Francois Champollion cracked code)



* "Read it if you can"



ELLEN CUM LAERTS
WEDSTRAAT 100 • 2012 CAPE TOWN

Ch. 80: The Nut



Take Aways?