

ANALYSIS

THE STYLE OF HERMAN MELVILLE

(1819-1891)

"The book is lightly but vigorously written; and we are acquainted with no work that gives a freer and more effective picture of barbarian life...The author's descriptions of the native girls are voluptuously colored, yet not more so than the exigencies of the subject appear to require...[He is] tolerant of codes of morals that may be little in accordance with our own...The narrative is skillfully managed, and in a literary point of view, the execution of the work is worthy of the novelty and interest of its subject."

Nathaniel Hawthorne
Review of *Typee*
The Salem Advertiser (Salem, Massachusetts)
(25 March 1846)

"The style of his tale is in places disfigured by mad (rather than bad) English; and its catastrophe is hastily, weakly, and obscurely managed....We have little more to say in reprobation or in recommendation of this absurd book [*Moby-Dick*]."

Anonymous
The Atheneum
(London 25 October 1851) 1112-13

"The descriptive powers of Mr. Melville are unrivalled...Language in the hands of this master becomes like a magician's wand...His delineation of character is actually Shakespearean--a quality which is even more prominently evinced in *Moby-Dick* than in any of his antecedent efforts."

William A. Butler
National Intelligencer
(December 1851)

"A BAD BOOK! Affected in dialect, unnatural in conception, repulsive in plot, and inartistic in construction. Such is Mr. Melville's worst and latest work [*Pierre, or The Ambiguities*, 1852]....We never met with so turgid, pretentious, and useless a book as *Pierre*....We can find nothing worthy of praise...We find everything to condemn....A repulsive, unnatural and indecent plot, a style disfigured by every paltry affectation of the worst German school, and ideas perfectly unparalleled for earnest absurdity, are deserving of condemnation....Mr. Melville's style...is precisely what a raving lunatic...might be supposed to spout under the influence of a particularly moonlight night....Mr. Melville...ought to have known better...His fancy is diseased, his morality vitiated, his style nonsensical and ungrammatical."

George Washington Peck
The American Whig Review
(16 November 1852) 446-54

"The style is maniacal--mad as a March hare--mowing, gibbering, screaming, like an incurable Bedlamite, reckless of keeper or strait [jacket]...The story itself is a strange, wild, furibund thing--about Captain Ahab's vow of revenge against one Moby Dick...The captain now stumps on ivory, and goes circumnavigating the globe in quest of the old offender, and raves by the hour in a lingo borrowed from Rabelais, Carlyle, Emerson [and others]."

William Harrison Ainsworth
New Monthly Magazine
(London 1853) 307-8

"In this story Melville is as fantastically poetical as Coleridge in the 'Ancient Mariner'...The language fairly shrieks under the intensity of his treatment, and the reader is under as excitement which is hardly controllable. The only wonder is that Melville is so little known and so poorly appreciated."

Anonymous
The Critic 22 (1893) 232

"One striking peculiarity of the book [*Moby-Dick*] is its Americanism--a word which needs definition. The theme and style are peculiar to this country. Nowhere but in America could such a theme have been treated in such a style....It is large in idea, expansive; it has an Elizabethan force and freshness and swing, and is,] is its Americanism--a word which needs definition. The theme and style are peculiar to this country. Nowhere but in America could such a theme have been treated in such a style....It is large in idea, expansive; it has an Elizabethan force and freshness and swing, and is, perhaps, more rich in figures than any style but Emerson's. It has the picturesqueness of the new world, and above all, a free-flowing humor, which is the distinct cachet of American literature....Melville is a Walt Whitman of prose."

Archibald MacMechan
"The Best Sea Story Ever Written"
Queen's Quarterly VII
(October 1899) 181-97

"[Melville] published, in 1851, his masterpiece, *Moby-Dick, or the White Whale*. If it were not for its inordinate length, its frequent inartistic heaping up of details, and its obvious imitation of Carlylean tricks of style and construction, this narrative of tremendous power and wide knowledge might be perhaps pronounced the greatest sea story in literature....In this uneven, but on the whole genuine, work of genius, Melville probably overtaxed himself...no revival of their author's fame will justify the republication of these productions of his decline."

William P. Trent
A History of American Literature 1607-1865
(Appleton 1903) 390-91

"He wrote *Mardi* (1849) which was Romantic to the borders of chaos....Again and again Melville achieves the epic prose of his later masterpiece. But this is epic prose without an epic story, and so is often hollow....The substance of Melville's autobiographical narratives and the passion of *Mardi* met in *Moby-Dick* to make it a masterpiece....*Moby-Dick* [1851] may be read at random for splendid, salty passages.... The passion in *Moby-Dick* makes the language always high, often toplofty, whether the chapters in their changing sequence are given over to speculation, information, poetry, or comedy."

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(Macmillan 1921-68) 84-101

"The greatest seer and poet of the sea for me is Melville....Melville at his best invariably wrote from a sort of dream-self, so that events which he relates as actual fact have indeed a far deeper reference to his own soul...His running under-consciousness was always mystical and symbolical."

D. H. Lawrence
Studies in Classic American Literature
(1923; Viking 1930) 193-99

"The first thing which must be said of Melville is that he writes the most execrable English....His second great vice is rant or rhetoric...It raves on for page after page, I almost pitch the book into the waste-paper basket and sweat that I will not read another line, however many people vouch for the author's genius. Almost--for Melville is undoubtedly one of those strange geniuses, peculiar to English literature and unintelligible to classicists like the French..."

If you care for language, you will be bored and exasperated by Melville in *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick* for some three hundred pages, but if you can stand this for so long, then suddenly something happens: the book--and its very imperfections and corruptions--suffers a sea-change into something rich and strange.

The same thing happens once or twice for brief moments in Mr. Joyce's *Ulysses*, a book which, both in style and conception, continually recalls *Moby-Dick*...I do not know exactly what the symbolism of Captain Ahab or Yillah means, but in each case the book seems to me at a certain moment to be lifted on to a higher plane of fantastic grandeur and poetry." [Virginia Woolf loathed *Ulysses*.]

Leonard Woolf
The Nation & The Athenaeum 33
(1 September 1923) 688

"Melville's characteristic faults, his digressions and his delays, are found in *Moby-Dick*, and are hardly less frequent than in most of his books; but they have little power to retard the reader. Even when he suspends the action, in order to discourse upon the technicalities of whaling, the suspension is not fatal; and though the symbolism is prominent, and readers are impatient of symbolism, it is not capable of marring the drama of Ahab and *Moby-Dick*, but rather heightens it....The height of Melville's great argument--which is Ahab's madness in challenging the world for pride--is measured by the simple jolly humor of the...ship...The never-to-be-ended combat depicted by Milton's Lucifer and Archangels is typified as boldly by Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Captain Ahab....Extravagances might well be pardoned in speaking of *Moby-Dick*, but they are not necessary, for there is no other book with which to compare it....

Melville is the most powerful of all the great American writers....As the light of a star may be many years in its passage to the earth, so Melville's work needed more than half a century to reveal its full luster in the great age of the novel....Melville began by being a writer of simple direct prose, reminding one partly of Defoe...and he became a writer of eloquent elaborated prose wanting in its strength and movement as his whales wanton in water. Something was due to his reading, to his admiration of Sir Thomas Browne, for example; just as that trick of rapidly repeated apostrophe which is found in *Moby-Dick* among other books is pretty clearly caught from Rabelais and Urquhart....

One of the chief gifts of [his] genius was his ear for rhythm. Melville adheres to that superb tradition of English writers—the tradition of prose written for the ear rather than the eye....All his great powers of mind are fused into beauty of speech....He depended for his impression on his reader, less upon picture than upon music, and his chief influence over our minds is felt, not when he is presenting something for us to see, but when he is vibrating with rhythms that stimulate our feelings. His appeal is emotional....Melville's characteristic manner [includes] his use of alliteration and suspension of clauses....It gives the long-breathed sea-like movement that is most characteristic of Melville's best prose...Something is contributed...by the compound words that Melville loved, something by those Biblical phrases or references with which his soul was saturated....The rhythm is definite but not fixed, and is unlike any rhythm of verse; but, like verse, the prose that moves thus easily, as the blood through the veins, is enlarged and enriched in its meaning by the form...

The unconscious mind, stealing silently between the eyes and the pen, suggests, offers, presses and overwhelms the conscious mind, and makes it less an equal than a servant....There is more of this perfection in *Moby-Dick* than elsewhere, but there is something of it in several of the books—in *Mardi* and *Pierre*; and it is because this perfection is not casual but truly characteristic that he must be called a great prose writer. Too often he is at the mercy of a bad genius, who tempts him to use all his gifts save one—restraint; and thus his lavish latinisms, his fond compound words, his Biblical allusions, his large metaphors and easy movements—all may be used but restraint is lacking and the result is ornate, or heavy, or slow, or extravagant, and merely unreadable....To admit that Melville did not always write greatly is easy, but it must be acknowledged first that he was nevertheless among the greatest of modern imaginative writers of prose."

John Freeman
Herman Melville
(Macmillan 1926) 170-87

"*Moby-Dick* stands by itself as completely as the *Divine Comedy* or the *Odyssey* stands by itself...Mr. Percy Boynton has performed the interesting experiment of transposing a paragraph in *Pierre* into excellent free verse, so strong and subtle are Melville's rhythms; and one might garner a whole book of verse from *Moby-Dick*....If occasionally, as with Shakespeare, the thought itself is bourn down by the weight of the

gold that decorates it, this is only a similar proof of Melville's immense fecundity of expression.... Melville's instrumentation is unsurpassed in the writing of the last century: one must go to a Beethoven or a Wagner for an exhibition of similar powers: one will not find it among works of literature....*Moby-Dick*, then is one of the first great mythologies to be created in the modern world...the best tragic epic of modern times and one of the fine poetic works of all time."

Lewis Mumford
Herman Melville: A Study of His Life and Vision
(1929; Harcourt 1962) 107-132

"Both content and style fell under the spell of his abstruse speculations and of his pessimism. He died in 1891 with his fame still unwon....He can be humorous, grotesque, pedestrian, tragic....He is a skeptic, fiercely rebellious, Promethean."

Stanley T. Williams
American Literature
(Lippincott 1933) 90, 92-93

"The symbolism of *Moby-Dick* is based on the antithesis of the sea and the land: the land represents the known, the mastered, in human experience; the sea, the half-known, the obscure region of instinct, uncritical feeling, danger, and terror....The ocean is the home especially of *Moby-Dick*, the white whale, the chief symbol and spirit of evil [to Ahab, not to Ishmael]; it is also the home of the great white squid, chaotic and formless, the symbol of chance in life....Probably no other book exists which so impresses us at once with the vastness of the physical universe."

Yvor Winters
In Defense of Reason
(Alan Swallow 1937, 1947) 200-33

"His first five books, *Typee* (1846), *Omoo* (1847), *Mardi* (1849), *Redburn* (1849), and *White-Jacket* (1850), won him fame and a wide following....Melville's popularity, which began to wane with the publication of *Moby-Dick*, was entirely lost through the confused metaphysics and iconoclasm of *Pierre*, for the public's preference was always for his early exotic romances....Since the 1930s he has come to be considered not only an outstanding writer of the sea and a great stylist who mastered both realistic narrative and a rich, rhythmical prose, but also a shrewd social critic and philosopher in his fiction."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 485-86

"The American with the richest natural gifts as a writer... In the winter of 1849, when...he had begun to read through Shakespeare, his first comment to Duyckinck was: 'Ah, he's full of sermons-on-the-mount, and gentle, aye, almost as Jesus'....By the time of *Moby-Dick*, Melville's characters were delivering dramatic speeches based on Shakespeare's verse....The summits of Melville's rhetoric ['Knights and Squires']: the formal progression of its almost architecturally balanced iterations rises to an eloquence of a purity and sublimity beyond what any other American writer has been able to command. Its crescendo completes his fusion of Christianity and democracy."

F. O. Matthiessen
*American Renaissance:
Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*
(Oxford 1941-62) 371-514

"The influence of Shakespeare on Melville was fundamentally a profound and pervasive act of fertilization....There are numerous and diverse parallels in language, in emotional effect, in situation and tragic action between *Moby-Dick* on the one hand, and, on the other, *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Timon*....Shakespeare was satisfied to leave the mysterious background of life to random probings or to inference. Melville could not. He was bound by many diverse considerations--by his inherited and his temperamental Calvinism, by the American pioneer in him as well as the Puritan--to confront the truth as directly and comprehensively as possible. In *Moby-Dick* the mysterious background truth looms in the foreground of palpable facts. It articulates itself in those facts and by so doing it confers upon them

something of an apocalyptic scale and intensity foreign to Shakespeare's prevailing naturalism....Just as in Dante's poem all men are classified as they stand in relation to the will of God, so in *Moby-Dick* the characters are classified in relation to the Whale--according to whether they fear him, worship him, or ignore him....Melville aimed to strike a balance between Dante and Shakespeare."

William Ellery Sedgwick
The Tragedy of Mind
(Harvard 1944) 84-126

"*White-Jacket* is the most mature book of the five which appeared before *Moby-Dick*, and ranks next to it in the completeness with which the theme is realized....*Mardi* is clogged with recondite allusions; with the rapid poems of *Yoomy* (Melville's first attempts at verse)...He was off on his long quest for the ultimate truth....The discordances of *Pierre*...arise from the fact that Melville attempted to accomplish by new methods more than any novelist had previously undertaken....Ill health dragged at his spirits...a breakdown soon after *Pierre* was published caused fears for his sanity....James Russell Lowell thought one of the episodes in *The Encantadas* 'the finest touch of genius he had seen in prose'."

Willard Thorp
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 441-64

"*Moby-Dick* has a rise and fall like the movement of an Elizabethan tragedy....Without exception action rises out of calm, whether it is the first chase of a whale, the appearance of the Spirit Spout, the storm, or the final chase....Of the soliloquies, Ahab's show the presence of Elizabethan speech most....The long ease and sea swell of Ishmael's narrative prose contrasts this short, rent language of Ahab."

Charles Olson
Call Me Ishmael
(City Lights Books 1947)

"Symbolism of Melville's brand may subsume allegory; and this is why even the most rigidly schematic interpretations of [his works] bring the reader some profit....Melville's method...allows his symbols to accumulate meanings in the course of their use, as they knock about in his myth-world, and so a single meaning attached to them often has at least a partial validity."

R. W. Short
"Melville as Symbolist"
The University of Kansas City Review XV (1948) 38-46

"In general, those critics and reviewers of 1851 and 1852 wrote perceptively and with admiration, who could understand Melville's peculiarly qualified Transcendentalism and the romantic rhetoric of his style, derived largely from the English writers of the seventeenth century (Shakespeare through Milton) and from Carlyle and Emerson among his contemporaries. The objectors at the time of the book's publication were primarily the religious conservatives or those who had a marked preference for the classic simplicity and directness of the eighteenth-century writers [Neoclassicists]."

Luther S. Mansfield & Howard P. Vincent, eds.
Moby-Dick; or, The Whale
(Hendricks House 1952-62) xv-xxxiii

"He has become...one of the prime heroes of American literature....'Every critic who finds a pat symbolic meaning for the whale is another Ahab, committing the same error of projection'....[In *Mardi*] Taji and his companions...visit the utopia, Serenia, where all things are regulated in accordance with the teachings of Alma (Christ). The manner of the journey recalls Rabelais; the style is often suggestive of Sir Thomas Browne."

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century
(Holt 1952) 58-80

“Herman Melville...‘the most powerful of all the great American writers’...Melville began, in *Typee* and *Omoo* with delightful narratives of travels in the South Seas, written in a straightforward style. There is no conscious allegory here, and no bitterness, except for occasional satirical sallies at the missionaries and the ‘civilized’ nations. *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*, also, are simple narratives, though imbued with darker elements: the former delves into the slums of Liverpool; the latter is an angry exposure of the cruelties practiced on board a frigate of the American Navy.

The transition to deliberate allegory came in *Mardi*—an unsatisfying book, effective in parts, but lacking integration. Melville reached his full stature in *Moby-Dick*, a powerful allegory of good and evil. By this time, too, his prose style had changed from one of Defoe-like simplicity to one of magnificent rhythms, which, while recalling Sir Thomas Browne’s, were Melville’s own....Melville’s reputation as one of the very greatest of American writers dates from about 1920....Recent studies have found in Melville’s writings a rich and inexhaustible mine of symbolical meanings.”

James E. Miller, Jr.
The Literature of the United States 1
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 1376, 1378-79

“Melville shows that he, like the Transcendentalists, believed in the doctrine of ‘linked analogies,’ in the symbolic significance of every natural fact.... *Moby-Dick* did not immediately meet with public acclaim, and the author’s waning popularity was truly lost when the following year he issued *Pierre*, another novel inquiring into the ambiguities of good and evil—a book darkly iconoclastic and plainly hectic in both story and style.”

James D. Hart & Clarence Gohdes, eds.
America’s Literature
(Holt 1955) 512-14

"Hawthorne’s ‘blackness’ excited Melville’s imagination, like the dark characters of Shakespeare...The romance *Moby-Dick* was half a Shakespearean play at times in its characters, soliloquies, stage-directions and all. For the rest, Melville, with his taste for what he called ‘oldness in things,’ developed a style reminiscent of the painters who wished to achieve the amber patina of age, the somber harmonious richness of the old masters....cultivating the antique style of the writers whom he loved."

Van Wyck Brooks & Otto L. Bettmann
Our Literary Heritage: A Pictorial History of the Writer in America
(Dutton 1956) 112-14

"The symbols [in *Moby-Dick*] are manifold and suggestive; the epic scope is opulent; the rhetoric is full and various; the incidental actions and metaphors are richly absorbing. The meaning is profound."

Richard Chase
The American Novel and Its Tradition
(Doubleday Anchor 1957) 105-112

"This celebrated novel [*Moby-Dick*]...was almost forgotten at the time of the author's death, but in this century it has come to be regarded as the most eminent American novel....In addition to the *Macbeth*-like touches in the plot and the *Lear*-like touches in the characterization, Melville borrowed the example of Shakespeare's rhapsodically metaphoric language, which resulted in *Moby-Dick* in passages of prose poetry unrivaled anywhere in American literature....At times beautifully written, at times turgid, *Pierre* always suggests the author’s own inner turbulence and his descent into the maelstrom of self."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 723-28

“Many contemporary writers of fiction [1950s-60s], looking for resources of the symbolic imagination, have turned to Melville, and many of them have found in his works the ‘allegories of moral consciousness’

which William Faulkner tells us he has found there....[His] audience, well enough pleased with *Omoo* (1847), the sequel to *Typee*, was disconcerted by *Mardi* (1849), with its allegories, its intellectuality, and ruminativeness. *Moby-Dick* was not to fare well either; too many readers regarded it as a potentially interesting adventure story spoiled by murky metaphysical speculations."

Richard Chase
Major Writers of America 1
(Harcourt 1962) 877-890

"Deeply stirred by his first meetings with Nathaniel Hawthorne and by reading Hawthorne's tales, inspired by his re-encountering the dark plays of Shakespeare, and struck by the epic grandeur of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and its Satan, Melville rewrote his first draft [*Moby-Dick*] almost entirely and recast it in a larger and more fiery mould. As he revised his manuscript, he added chapters on the facts and processes of whaling and developed more fully his...symbols: the umbilical monkey-rope ('mortal interindebtedness'), the 'blackness of darkness' (the mystery of iniquity), and the mask of 'dead blind wall' of *Moby-Dick*'s massive impenetrable forehead that 'butts all enquiring heads at last' (the inscrutability of the divine power that created man.)"

William M. Gibson & George Arms, eds.
Twelve American Writers
(Macmillan 1962) 265-67

"Melville reached his full stature in *Moby-Dick*, a powerful allegory of good and evil. By this time, too, his prose style had changed from one of Defoe-like simplicity to one of magnificent rhythms, which, while recalling Sir Thomas Browne's, were Melville's own."

James E. Miller, Jr.
The Literature of the United States 1, 3rd ed.
(Scott, Foresman, 1963) 137-38

"From the opening sentence of the novel to the Epilogue, from Ishmael to Job, scriptural impact and Christian idealism are part of the fabric of the book [*Moby-Dick*]. Beyond the evocative quality of the proper names, the episodic echoes, and the allusions lie the Judeo-Christian elements of ritual and custom, and the moral and spiritual tradition."

Egbert S. Oliver
Studies in American Literature: Whitman, Emerson, Melville and Others
(Eurasia/Ram Nagar, New Delhi 1965) 54-115

"The extraordinary rhythm of the book [*Moby-Dick*] is the wavelike pull, forward and back, between the expansive human will and the contraction of necessity. Freedom and necessity battle throughout the book....If ever there was a style that belonged to America's own age of discover, a style innocently imperialist, romantic, visionary, drunk on symbols, full of the American brag, this is it....*Moby-Dick* is full of symbols that unlike those of Emerson and Thoreau do not exhaust the natural facts from which they are extracted....Without Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Moby-Dick* might have remained the whaling yarn Melville started out to write."

Alfred Kazin
An American Procession
(1984; Random House/Vintage 1985) 132-159

"The young writer [Melville] had discovered the works of Robert Burton, Sir Thomas Browne, Francois Rabelais, and others and, encouraged by their example, broke the bounds of conventional form. He was taken aback when the public spurned his effort and reviewers urged him to resume the style and structure of his adventure narratives."

Justin Kaplan
The Harper American Literature 1
(Harper & Row 1987) 1926-29

"Surveying the comic elements of *Moby-Dick*, we can say that this is the *only* American literary work of the antebellum period that incorporates all popular humorous idioms of the day....*Battle-Pieces* remains

(with Whitman's *Drum Taps*) the most powerful poem about the Civil War precisely because Melville is able to take a broadly sympathetic overview of martyrdom and victory on both sides, and lend some measure of hope through the use of demythologized biblical imagery."

David S. Reynolds

*Beneath the American Renaissance:
The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*
(Harvard 1989) 53-164

Melville's first two novels, *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), are first-person adventure novels written in the conventional style of the travel literature popular in the 19th century. His travels in Polynesia and his study of mythologies moved him to become original in *Mardi* (1849), an experimental romance, an exotic allegory exploring myths of the world as represented by characters on fictional islands in the Pacific. It is sometimes realistic but mostly philosophical allegory in the style of romantic myth--a "chartless voyage" far too obscure to be popular. The commercial failure of *Mardi* after the successes of his first two novels prompted Melville to change his approach again.

Redburn (1849) and *White Jacket* (1850) anticipate the Naturalism of the later 19th century: They are (1) studies of industries: shipping and the Navy; (2) they document at length the physical details and social realities in those environments; (3) they depict problems of the poor who are (4) trapped in oppressive circumstances; (5) they expose social injustice--poverty in Liverpool and flogging on Navy ships; (6) they are deterministic but contrary to later Naturalism (7) they affirm free will in resistance to victimization, as represented by the sailor who tears off his white jacket symbolizing innocence and conformity when he falls from the masthead. All of Melville's works have the same general theme: the quest for Truth, as when Redburn becomes suspicious of a friend "as a teller of the truth."

Moby-Dick (1851) is Melville's effort to write a masterpiece successful enough to pay off his debts. In his study of Hawthorne he learned how to write clear allegory, a great advance from *Mardi*. Hawthorne's influence is acknowledged in the dedication of *Moby-Dick* to him and in the naming of the boat that takes Ishmael over to Nantucket "the little Moss," an allusion to Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse*, which Melville had reviewed. *Moby-Dick* expresses Melville's agonistic pantheism in answer to the Christianity of Hawthorne, who resembles Starbuck. The language and style of *Moby-Dick* were influenced by Melville's study of Shakespeare, and to a lesser extent Milton especially at the end when Ahab is "like Satan." His knowledge of world mythologies and history prompted him to become the most allusive American writer, prolific in referring to myths and heroes and historical events and other writers--by the hundreds, half a dozen in the same sentence--amplifying his themes and symbolism by placing them in the context of the collective consciousness of the human race, the Universal Mind.

The influence of Shakespeare is most obvious in Ahab's soliloquies, in the form of a play in "Midnight, Forecastle," in stage instructions such as those for "The Cabin," in the contrasts of high and low characters, in the abundant metaphors, in dramatic periodic sentences and thrilling rhetoric--what he called "a bold and nervous lofty language"--such as the paragraph introduced by Tashtego as the men wait for *Moby-Dick* when he is rising up from the deep *right under their boat!*: "The birds!--the birds!" cried Tashtego," the last speech of Ahab beginning "Oh, now I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief," and the most powerful dramatic image in American literature: "at that instant, a red arm and a hammer hovered backwardly uplifted in the open air, in the act of nailing the flag faster and yet faster to the subsiding spar. A sky-hawk...went down with the ship..."

At the time Melville wrote *Moby-Dick* he was an idealistic liberal: "man, in the ideal, is so noble and so sparkling, such a grand and glowing creature, that over any ignominious blemish in him all his fellows should run to throw their costliest robes. That immaculate manliness we feel within ourselves, so far within us, that it remains intact though all the outer character seem gone....Thou shalt see it shining in the arm that wields a pick or drives a spike; that democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God; Himself! The great God absolute! The centre and circumference of all democracy! His omnipresence, our divine equality!" Sadly, nothing Melville wrote pleased women readers, who were up to 80% of the market for novels. His unpopularity especially after *Pierre* (1852), obscurity, poverty, responsibility to provide for

his family, dependence on his father-in-law for financial support, and poor reputation among his relatives--they thought he was insane--all contributed to his disillusionment.

Pierre dramatizes a tragic vision of moral life as a hopelessly tangled confusion of ambiguities in which truth is impure and the good sometimes impossible to know. The style of *Pierre* is allusive and ponderously philosophical, its ideas more present than the characters. It was denounced by Victorians as a disgusting and evil book, destroying what was left of Melville's reputation. Consequently, *The Confidence-Man* (1859) is one of the darkest novels in literature, a pessimistic rejection of Christ "the lamb-like man" and of the human race as composed of dupes and con-men. The alienation expressed in *The Confidence-Man* anticipates the Postmodernism of the late 20th century. Its style is sinister, insinuating and cynical, as if narrated by the supreme con-artist, Satan.

The Civil War wounded Melville deeply. By the time he wrote *Billy Budd*, almost completely forgotten and reduced to being a customs inspector, he was resigned: "aren't it all sham?" Like his vision of life his prose style became conservative, Neoclassical, reserved, factual, historical and as carefully precise as the style of an attorney in court: "The enormity of the crime and the extreme depravity of the criminal appear the greater in view of the character of the victim, a middle-aged man respectable and discreet, belonging to that minor official grade, the petty officers, upon whom, as none know better than the commissioned gentlemen, the efficiency of His Majesty's navy so largely depends."

The only elevated style in *Billy Budd* is reserved for the hanging, a scene that parallels the crucifixion of Christ: "it chanced that the vapory fleece hanging low in the East was shot through with a soft glory as of the fleece of the Lamb of God seen in mystical vision, and simultaneously therewith, watched by the wedged mass of upturned faces, Billy ascended, and, ascending, took the full rose of the dawn." This is the sorrowful tone and measured tempo of tragedy. Saddest of all is the tragedy of Melville's own soul as well as Billy's, his lost innocence and inability to believe in Jesus except as "the man of sorrows," even though he also thought Jesus was "the truest of all men." He renders Billy's death with a tenderness conveyed by his imagery and prose rhythms. His style here and his allegory as a whole makes clear that Melville loves Billy as a personification of ideals--innocence, goodness and beauty. And his identification of Billy with "the Lamb of God" likewise expresses a love of Jesus.

Michael Hollister (2020)