

A Reflection
On Melville's
Accomplishments

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American Literature

Mellville

"As an author Melville both courted failure and scorned success."(pg. 613, A Companion to Melville Studies). How many famous legends in time have existed to know no fame. How many remarkable artist have lived and died never receiving due credit for there work. Herman Melville is clearly an artist of words. Herman Melville is certainly a prodigy when it comes to writing. Herman Melville never received hardly any credit for any of his works. Melville wrote such novels as Moby-Dick, and Billy Budd. Melville wrote about things that he knew about. He wrote about his own experiences. The one thing that he loved, and knew the most about was whaling.

Herman Melville was born in 1819, the son of Allan and Maria Melville. He was one of a Family of eight children - four boys and four girls - who was raised comfortably in a nice neighborhood in New York City. Herman Melville came from a famous blood line out of Albany, NY. Melville's grandfather, General Peter Gansevoort, was a hero. Even though the General died six years before Melville was born, Melville still put him in his book, Pierre.

On the outer side of the blood line there was Major Melville. The Major was a wealthy Boston merchant who was one of the famous "Mohawks" who boarded the ship

of the East India Company that night of 1773, and dumped the cargo in to the Boston Harbor. Later Major Melville became the Naval Officer of The Port of Boston, a post given to him by Gorge Washington. It is like the two blood lines fitted together perfectly to create Herman Melville. Herman had the strength of the General, and the crazy hart of the Major.

Herman Melville was "hardly more than a boy" when he ran out to sea after his fathers death. A young Melville sighed up as a boy on the St. Lawrence to Liverpool and back to New York. Many of the events that show up in Melville's Redburn are actuarial events that happened of his first voyage. After returning home and finding his mothers family fortune gone, Melville decided to take a journey over land this time to the Mississippi river to visit his Uncle Thomas. Through out all of Melville's work the image of inland landscapes, of farms, prairies, rivers, lakes, and forest recur as a counterpoint to the barren sea. Also in Moby-Dick Melville tells how he was a "Vagabond" on the Erie Canal, which was the way Melville returned.

Melville wrote that it was not the lakes or forest that sank in as much as the "oceanic vastness and the swell of the one and in the wide, slow, watery restlessness," (pg. Arving), of the prairies. Some even think of the novel, Pierre, as a "A prairie in print, wanting the flowers and freshness of the savanah, but all most equally puzzling to find a way through it." (Pg. 1, On Melville.) About a year latter Melville signed up as foremasthand on the whaler Acushnet, which set sail on the third of January, 1841, that set sail from New Bedford. Many events of his voyage directly correspond with those in his novel, Typee.

Melville set up residence in the Taipi-Vai valley, which he called Typee. He and a friend, named Toby Green, struck out on one day's leave to the interior of the island. Melville got sick and had to live with a tribe of savages that he found for a month or so. All this time, Toby had gone to try to get help but was unsuccessful. After a long month of waiting for Toby, Melville decided to try to escape, and was successful. Melville illustrated all of these events that happened in his novel Typee. But "Typee is a work of the imagination, not sober history, and one constantly crosses in it the invisible line between "fact" and the life of the fancy and memory." (pg. 61, Arvin)

After Melville's escape he sighed up on a ship called Lucy Ann. Melville still had

a bad leg from his experiences with the natives. This journey was a short one but none the less eventful. The journey was full of different changes in command and mutiny. These events on the , Lucy Ann, Melville put in to a book he named Omoo. This journey ended in Tahiti.

After a while in Tahiti, Melville decided to join the crew of the Charles and Henry. When the Charles and Henry got to the Hawaiian island of Maui the Captain Coleman discharged him. The events on the Charles and Henry were also to be put in to text. Melville put this leg of his journey in a novel named Mardi, which Hawthorn described as, "With depths here and there that compel a man to swim for his life."(Hawthorn)

A month after Melville's arrival in Hawaii, Melville signed on as a crew member in the US Navy, on board the United States. He sailed on her for fourteen months. On board the United States Melville got to see Lima, "the city of king's," which Melville called, "the strangest, saddest impression on Melville than anything Melville would ever see again. It also probably made a bigger effect in all of his writing than any of the rest of his whaling cruises. Melville never wrote about what ever happened in Lima, the way that he wrote about the cruises he took around the Southern Pacific Islands, but it is apparent in all of his works and letter that Lima made a greater impression. "Lima was a city in whose whiteness and beauty was a latent horror."(Pg. 71, Arving) Melville began to think "the world's one Lima."

Melville's homeward voyage on the United States, which Melville started to call the Never-Sink, became the situation where Melville made a new friendship with a sailing mate named Jack Chase. This friend for one voyage didn't no it but was to become the model character, for one of Melville's greatest works, Billy Budd, fifty years latter. Also this last voyage home was Melville's last days at sea.

"Young as he was-he was only in his mid-twenties-a long period lay before him during which his life would be quite peculiarly an inward one."(pg. 121, Arving) Between the ages of eighteen to twenty-one Melville had gone through enough experiences to supply him for a lifetime of novels and works. "Melville's tales and sketches are a remarkable achievement. That he could do so much in those four years seems to me astonishing."(Pg. 271, A Companion to Melville Studies). From these experiences Melville wrote many works, just to name a few famous ones; are first Redburn, then Typee, Omoo, Moby-Dick, Mardi, and White-Jacket. Also from these experiences Melville began to write travel narrative. "Into the short space of four or five years Melville had crammed more "experience," more sheer activity, more roughing of it, than all but a few modern authors."(pg. 121, Arving)

Melville had written seven books in the seven years following his arrival home. Also, one of those books was one of the "highest order." It is truly amazing that after all that he had been through in his voyages, Melville still had enough in him to write seven consecutive excellent novels. Melville's unexpected sudden success as an author surprised not only the literary society, but also Melville just as much. This success also threw him into the literary society. Melville had longed for some literate companionship in his time away from home. In Melville's New York home he built an excellent library of contemporary writers and old books.

No book before Melville's time compares in form with *Moby-Dick*. It is a work of art that has simply amazed literary scholars since it first was published. In Melville's time most had absolutely no idea of what to think. One of the keys to Melville's structure is that from the beginning to the end of the voyage of the *Pequod* we are reminded over and over again that the voyage was fated to a catastrophe. The meaning of *Moby-Dick* is so involved and complex that very few critics would agree upon a single interpretation of any events or symbolism in the novel. Many critics suggest that the meaning of *Moby-Dick* is a way to show the meaning of the universe as opposed to man's desire to see only one meaning in any one thing. He shows this by showing that man's eyes are located so that he is always focusing upon one single object. Whereas the whale's eyes are on opposite sides of his head. So that the whale can focus on two different objects at any time. Another example of this idea is the coffin - life-buoy motif. This single object is first a coffin for Ahab, then becomes a canoe, storage chest, a work of art and religion, then a life-buoy which saved Ishmael's life. Thus one should not put one meaning in to an object, for that person could find much more use if they stay open minded.

"How long, when Melville settled down to write his "whaling voyage," the conception of *Moby-Dick* been present to his mind it is impossible to say." (Pg. 143, Arving). In the way that Melville wrote his first stories, one after another for seven years, just after he had arrived home should make one wonder. It would probably make one wonder whether when he arrived home all of what he had gone through had just exploded on to paper. Or that in his time at sea he had actually thought up all of these books and when he got home he was finally able to just put them down on paper.

"The spectacle of Melville composing *Moby-Dick* is the spectacle of an artist working at the very height of his creativeness and confidence, like a great athlete who has reached, and only just reached, his optimum in age, in physical vigor, in trained agility." (Pg. 217, Arving). This is a good comparison. Take for example Joe

Montana.

Montana hit his prime age in the Super Bowl and was unquestionably the best quarterback ever at that time. But after a few injuries and a few more years added to his life even the great Montana started to die in football. Even though he wasn't what he was before a time he could come out and just for that night prove he really is the best.

The same thing happened to Melville. Melville was pouring out great books for a few years, and then he wrote Moby-Dick. Moby-Dick is also unquestionably one of the great novels of all time. Melville put every thing he had into Moby-Dick. Then after Moby-Dick Melville started to slowdown a little. Not that he died completely but he wasn't putting out books like his first few years as an author. He still would write something just spectacular every once in a while.

"Melville's text in particular are like another of his most famous images - the coffin lifebuoy that impress such opposites as life and death." (Pg. 516, A Companion to Melville Studies). Melville had his own way of writing. Who else but Captain Ahab would have said of the Great White Whale "he tasks me, he heaps me"? Who but a true artist such as Melville would have invented his own verbs? "That is what a great writer is, a person who creates a new language." (Pg. 562, A Companion to Melville Studies). In the first four or five years Melville wrote almost out of "dejection." Melville was not as readily excepted in America as he was in England, or the rest of Europe. Melville drew only a little criticism in America, but most all of it was extremely positive. Melville was not one to write of the good in life. Rather he tended to write of the negatives. Nowhere will one find this more obvious than in Pierre. "Pierre itself, taken as a whole and considered in strictly literary ground, is one of the most painfully ill-conditioned books ever to be produced by a first-rate mind." (Pg. 219, Arving).

After Melville had written Pierre, he had lost all of his "confidence in both man and nature, he had lost his sense of the tragic." (Pg. 251, Arving) This way of thought he lost by the time he composed The Confidence Man. what took it's place was an "obsession with littleness and falsity." (Pg. 252, Arving) Melville wrote The Confidence Man when he was in his mid-thirties, and was to lead the other thirty-five years in much the same state. "The image of brightness and darkness, repeated with habitual frequency in Melville's writings." (pg. 607, A Companion to Melville Studies).

The novel *The Confidence Man* was really the last good novel Melville was to write until his dying days. Melville would continue to write poems, such as *Clarel*, *Battle-Pieces*, *John Marr*, and *Timoleon*, but had no real great accomplishments. Melville was to slowly die out until he finished one last manuscript, which occupied the final months of life. This manuscript was that of *Billy Budd*. That manuscript Melville got published but never new of it success, because he was to die on September, 28th of 1891, quietly in his bed, and "would be gratified to know that his death went all but unregarded by the world." (Pg. 292, Arving).

For the last thirty-five years after Melville's, *The Confidence Man*. Melville had led a quiet unremembered life. After his death all that was written was a small obituary in the *New York Times*. "In 1938 Herman Melville had been dead for forty-seven years. He had died in obscurity and for 3 decades until the publication of Ramon Weavers biography in 1921 he was known until to a small but growing group of academics and bibliophiles." (Pg. 1, James Brarbour) Melville's work was not even found until 1920, and *Billy Budd* wasn't even published until 1924.

Melville's greatest accomplishment was no doubt his walling excursions in the Southern Pacific. This is more than apparent enough in all of his writings. Of most of his works, most were in junction with his experiences in the Southern Pacific. The saddest thing about it all is that he died not even knowing of his own accomplishments. Melville' death was some what like a coffin floating amongst the waves in the sea, to be picked up latter.

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