'This Whole Worshipping World':

Proto-Secular Humanist Morality in *Moby Dick* and *Pierre*

By

Timothy Becker

Honors Thesis
Department of English & Comparative Literature
University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill
2016

Approved by:

Philip F. Gura

María DeGuzmán

Jane F. Thrailkill

Table of Contents

Introduction

Atheists and religious people alike find enough likeminded expression in Herman Melville's major works to appropriate him as an icon of their beliefs. Melville's biography and quotations appear on the websites for the Freedom From Religion Foundation, *Positive Atheism Magazine*, and the *Freethought Almanac*.[1] He is also listed on the *Wikipedia* page of the bicentennial Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York as a notable member, while a prerecorded Melville-themed 'walking tour' of Manhattan—at one time accessible by scanning a QR code in the lobby of the New York Public Library—urges listeners to visit Trinity Church and climb up into the belfry as the author himself presumably had often done.[2]

Moby-Dick alone lends itself to myriad theological interpretations, inspiring book-length works claiming it on behalf of everything from Calvinism to Hinduism and filling academic journals with proposed connections to Hebraism, Existentialism, Gnosticism, and more.[3] Biographers and literary critics speculate on the influence in Melville's life of

---

[1] Annie Laurie Gaylor, "Herman Melville," *Freedom From Religion Foundation*, accessed October 18, 2015, https://ffrf.org/news/day/dayitems/item/14487-herman-melville; "Positive Atheism's Big List of Quotations," *Positive Atheism Magazine*, accessed October 18, 2015, http://www.positiveatheism.org/hist/quotes/quote-m1b.htm; Ronald Bruce Meyer, "Herman Melville (1819)," *Freethought Almanac*, accessed October 18, 2015, http://freethoughtalmanac.com/?p=2788

[2] "Unitarian Church of All Souls," *Wikipedia*, accessed October 18, 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unitarian_Church_of_All_Souls; Elizabeth Kray, "Walking Tour: Herman Melville's Downtown New York City," *Poets.org*, last modified June 27, 2006, https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/walking-tour-herman-melvilles-downtown-new-york-city

[3] T. Walter Herbert, *Moby Dick and Calvinism: A world Dismantled* (Rutgers University Press, 1977; H.B. Kulkarni, *Moby-Dick: A Hindu Avatar* (Boulder: Utah State University Press, 1970); Elisa New, "Bible Leaves! Bible Leaves! Hellenism and Hebraism in Melville's *Moby-Dick*," *Poetics Today* 19, no. 2 (Summer, 1998): 281-303; Ma Felisa López Liquete, "Melville, An Existentialist Humanist," *Revista*

his baptism in the First Reformed Dutch Church, his mother's Calvinist orthodoxy, his father's Unitarianism, the strict Protestantism of his ancestors, and his famed encounters with Paganism that informed his earlier work. Yet for every word Melville wrote seemingly aligning himself with these religious and philosophical positions, he wrote another dozen words satirizing and indicting them. Melville's ambiguity is at once his most frustrating and endearing quality for those who make pilgrimages to the farthest reaches of his vast, digressive prose. To that end, there is one more 'ism' deserving of a closer look in Melville's major works: secular humanism.

In this essay, I intend to show that secular humanist ideals anchor Melville's three major novels of the 1850's—a moral constant amid his metaphysical and theological uncertainty and a worldview with which he engaged continually throughout his oscillation between belief and doubt. I argue that a measured and compromising approach to secular humanism is Melville's alternative to the maddening search for 'the absolute' in nature or in humanity that plagued some of his well-known characters. I begin my pilgrimage with Melville's quintessential humanist Ishmael in *Moby Dick*, contrasting Ishmael's humanism and capacity for compromise with the individualism and absolutism of Ahab. Next, I examine Melville's challenge to humanist idealism through the downfall of his eponymous protagonist in *Pierre* and through his disappointment with U.S. society as portrayed in *The Confidence-Man*. Before examining the rise and fall of secular humanist morality in these works, I begin with a brief overview of the religious landscape in which Melville was writing and then define all crucial terms.

---

de Estudios Norteamericanos 1, no. 1 (1991): 49-57; Thomas Vargish, "Gnostic Mythos in Moby-Dick," *PMLA* 81, no. 3 (Jun., 1966): 272-277.

The Rise of Secular Humanism in the United States

In the antebellum period, the United States was a landscape of religious crisis. The dizzying trend of denominational fragmentation generated an astounding number of new sects of Protestantism and related religions in the early nineteenth century. This landscape, which Brian LeBeau termed "a virtual breeding ground for new religions," reached its peak in the Second Great Awakening between 1790 and 1860, culminating in a period of religious disorder, unrest, and inventiveness unequalled at any other in time in U.S. history.[4] Often these new denominations owed their existence to doctrinal disputes, resulting in a plurality of Bible-believing sects each pioneered by reformers convinced of the rightness of their own biblical interpretation—a paradox of theological diversity and theological certainty that Melville frequently addresses and even ridicules in his work.[5]

Nathan Hatch argues that such denominational fragmentation reflected the fierce individualism fostered under the United States' particular brand of democratic rhetoric and practice.[6] Yet by this selfsame token of disunity, the core message of the faith, buffered as it may have been by its sectarian formulations, became more effective at transmitting Christianity throughout the culturally, ethnically, and economically diverse population of the United States. Perhaps the greatest irony of this period of religious revival, however, is that the mechanisms by which the message of Christianity spread virulently—the simplification of the Christian message into a few essential beliefs and

---

[4] Brian F. LeBeau, *Religion in America to 1865* (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 137.

[5] For perspective, see Frank S. Mead's classic reference *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1951). The first edition lists 255 distinct denominations, many of which formed in the first half of the nineteenth century. Subsequent editions categorize these and more into at least twenty-two main families.

[6] Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 68.

the effective transmission of this essence via mass-printed evangelical tracts—have also been identified as vital to the rise of secularism in the antebellum United States.[7]

Secularism is the operation of civic duty and public life apart from or independent of religion, manifested in policies such as the separation of church and state. Nineteenth-century secularism in the United States grew largely from religious rhetoric and belief. In order to reach a more diverse and widespread audience, evangelical tracts (a novel method for gospel transmission) whittled down complex theology into essential tenets of faith, such as urging readers toward Christian charity, moral goodness, and personal responsibility, which in their diluted form were as relevant to secular approaches to civil and social duty as to beliefs about personal salvation.[8] Tracy Fessenden considers this emergence of secularism through the means of evangelical transmission, which she refers to as the "Protestant-secular continuum," as the genesis of what became known as "American Civil Religion, a devotion to the nation's sacred ideals that allegedly transcends denominational alliance."[9] Thus, the ideals of religious humanism and secular humanism in the antebellum United States were in many respects quite identical.

In this continuum between Protestant Christianity and secularism, and also from the denominational fragmentation of Protestantism, several forms of both religious and secular humanism began to emerge in the United States, including Unitarianism in New England. From this Unitarian tradition the humanist ideals with which Melville interacts

---

[7] John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 5.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 140.

in his work, especially *Moby Dick*, begin to take the form of an organized humanist movement distinctive of "American"[†] democratic ideals and religious liberalism.

Melville's Unitarian Connection

The Unitarians were religious humanists who rose to prominence in intellectual circles in New England beginning in the eighteenth century. Unitarianism remained a relatively small denomination, but it nevertheless had a profound impact on literary production in the antebellum era, particularly in New England; for example, Lawrence Buell finds that "fully half of the region's writers who might arguably be called 'major'" were Unitarians at some point in their lives.[10] Daniel Walker Howe considers Harvard Unitarianism to have been a necessary philosophical stepping-stone between orthodox Christianity and the religious liberalism of New Englanders like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau: "Such Transcendentalists as these could never have written their splendid paeans to individualism if the Unitarians had not paved the way for them by destroying Calvinistic doctrines of original sin."[11] While the philosophy of Emerson and other religious liberals in the United States eventually led them to renounce all

---

[†] The term "American" appears in quotation marks to indicate its usage as an ideological construction rather than as a rigid geographical designator. The term, as used in Melville's work and that of many of his critics, refers primarily to an identity assumed by people from the United States, rather than as a proper term for the roughly 1 billion people throughout the Western Hemisphere with an equal historical and geographical claim to the title "American." All first-hand instances of this term and its variations (including reference to the United States as "America") will indicate the former meaning, as indicated by the continued use of quotation marks.

[10] Lawrence Buell, "The Literary Significance of the Unitarian Movement," in *American Renaissance*, edited by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 2004), 241-258, 242. Buell acknowledges that the impact of Unitarianism on literature has been exaggerated in the literary 'canon,' which almost exclusively inducted works by white males mainly from New England, while overlooking works from women, minority writers, and southern writers. Nevertheless, Buell finds that Unitarianism's literary impact in a broader context is still notably "disproportionate to its size" (242).

[11] Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy 1805-1861* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 10.

organized religion, other Transcendentalist figures, such as Theodore Parker, operated within organized religion and often in the Unitarian church.[12]

These liberal religious movements, which de-emphasized the role of God and the supernatural and encouraged a positive view of innate human morality and potential, fused together with Enlightenment ideals of reason to form much of the basis for modern secular humanism.[13] Thus, nineteenth-century Unitarianism in New England was in part a transitional component in the development of modern secular humanism, and was at the productive center of moral thought in the United States. It is partly through Unitarianism that Melville encountered these humanist ideals that he embraces, challenges, and fiercely questions throughout his major works.

In February 1850, largely due to the Unitarian affiliations of his wife Elizabeth, Melville enrolled in the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City in the middle of the forty-six year ministerial tenure of Henry Whitney Bellows.[14] Notably, Bellows is responsible for the oft-misattributed epigram, "God has no religion."[15] While it is safe to assume that Melville made little more than the required occasional visit, there are echoes of Bellows' Unitarian doctrine and oratory style in some of his theologizing and philosophizing characters, including Plotinus Plinlimmon in *Pierre*.[16] Such indicators

---

[12] Ibid.

[13] For a brief overview of humanism and its ties to Transcendentalism, liberal Christianity, and the Enlightenment, see Harvard's *Pluralism Project*. http://www.pluralism.org/religion/humanism/belief.

[14] Herschel Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography, Volume 2, 1851-1891* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 65-66.

[15] Henry Whitney Bellows, *Re-statements of Christian Doctrine, In Twenty-Five Sermons* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1867), 149, accessed September 25, 2015, https://ia600407.us.archive.org /15/items/restatementschr05bellgoog/restatementschr05bellgoog.pdf.

[16] For example, Bellows uses a nautical navigation metaphor to demonstrate the benefit of doctrinal relativism over fundamentalism, and does so as part of his series subtitled "In Twenty-Five Sermons" (see previous citation). Similarly, in *Pierre*, Plinlimmon uses a nautical timekeeping metaphor to

suggest that Melville at the very least engaged enough with the ideas of the Unitarian influences in his life to respond to them in his work, even if he was at best infrequently involved in All Souls and remained largely unconvinced by their doctrine.

Despite Melville's doubts about Unitarianism that persisted throughout his years of membership in All Souls and his social involvement in the largely Unitarian literary and philosophical scene in New England and New York, he nonetheless supported a number of the distinct (and at the time controversial) positions held by proponents of the Unitarian movement beginning in the 1830s in the era David Miano characterizes as the "Transcendentalist Stage" of Unitarianism in the United States.[17] Such positions included the turning away from the idea of scripture as infallible, the reconfiguring of scriptural interpretation according to democratic individualism, and the universalizing of the moral responsibility of good will toward others.

Many Unitarians posited that biblical scripture, while full of potential revelations of God, was not the infallible *word of God*. In his highly influential 1836 lectures "The Rationale of Religious Inquiry," English Unitarian James Martineau demands that even scripture must yield to reason and subject itself to humankind's increasing understanding of the natural world: "Reason is the ultimate appeal, the supreme tribunal, to which the test of even Scripture must be brought."[18] Such rationalist readings, unlike previous

---

demonstrate the benefit of pursuing practical virtue rather than unattainable Christian perfection, and does so as part of his series subtitled "In Three Hundred and Thirty-Three Lectures" (*Pierre* 210-215).

[17] David Miano, "The Development of American Unitarian Theology," *American Unitarian Conference*, 2006, accessed November 1, 2015, http://www.americanunitarian.org/mianotheology.htm

[18] James Martineau, *The Rationale of Religious Inquiry* (London: J. Chapman, 1845), 64, accessed February 26, 2016, https://ia902606.us.archive.org/5/items/rationalereligi00whitgoog/rationalereligi00whit goog.pdf. For an overview of Unitarian rationalism in which Martineau was writing and lecturing, see Joseph Henry Allen, *A History of the Unitarians and the Universalists in the United States* (New York: Christian Literature, 1894), 146-169, accessed September 20, 2015, https://ia700402.us.archive.org/8/items/historyofunitari00alle/historyofunitari00alle.pdf.

skeptical assessments of scripture that focused exclusively on challenging miraculous claims in the Old Testament, reorganized Unitarian attitudes toward the New Testament as well, deemphasizing the miraculous aspects of the gospels and focusing instead on the works and teachings of Jesus as the example of a moral life.[19] Secular humanists, having distinguished themselves from Unitarians in the mid-1900s, continued to uphold the works and teachings of the biblical Jesus as moral exemplars despite self-consciously severing religious ties altogether.

Unlike Secular Humanists, Unitarians remained committed to scripture; however, in contrast to other sects of Protestantism that were founded on theological certainty, Unitarians both recognized and encouraged diverse and individualized interpretations of scripture, promoting whichever interpretations were most accessible. "There is no universal and unchanging language for metaphysical ideas [such as those central to Christian sectarian doctrine]," John Hamilton Thom insists in an 1839 lecture, "[however], the symbols of language that reveal the living Jesus are of universal significance, and finding their way at once to every heart, stamp upon it a faithful image of the Christ."[20] Such redefining of humanity's relationship to biblical truth echoes William Ellery Channing's 1819 Baltimore Sermon—a lecture credited with first articulating the theological principles of Unitarianism, leading to the formation of the

---

[19] For a famous example, see *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, compiled around 1820 by Thomas Jefferson. In this book, often referred to as the 'Jefferson Bible,' Jefferson compiled numerous passages of the New Testament, particularly the doctrine and teachings of Jesus Christ, while omitting supernatural elements such as miracles and prophecy. Jefferson referred to himself variously as a deist and a Unitarian, although his religious beliefs in his writings more closely associate him with Unitarianism. See Michael Corbett et al, *Politics and Religion in the United States* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1999), 63.

[20] John Hamilton Thom, "Christianity Not the Property of Critics and Scholars; But the Gift of God to All Men," John Hamilton Thom, James Martineau, and Henry Giles, *Unitarianism Defended* (London: Kinder, 1839), accessed October 25, 2015, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/49930/49930-h/49930-h.htm.

Unitarian denomination in 1825. Channing assures, "We regard the Scriptures as the records of God's successive revelation to mankind… Whatever doctrines seem to us to be *clearly taught* in the Scriptures, we receive without reserve or exception."[21]

Unitarianism, then, sought to establish moral credibility in humanity based on the democratic principle of individualism, trusting individuals to interpret doctrine in a way that would orient them toward moral behavior and stressing the equal accessibility of moral truth to all. In a treatise of Unitarianism, Minot Judson Savage urges, "Have faith, then, in *the people*… faith in their healthy instincts, faith in their general sanity, faith in their desire for the right and the true."[22] In this way, Unitarianism—as it was presented to Melville—contained many aspects of the core doctrine of secular humanism, in that it promoted the reorientation of humanity away from supernatural commitments and toward a universally accessible moral responsibility for goodwill.

Melville and the *Humanist Manifesto*s

Secular humanism came into vogue in the twentieth century, as Darwinian evolution worked alongside the technological advances of modernization to support beliefs that the universe is self-existent and that humankind has infinite potential. Melville's three major novels of the 1850's—*Moby Dick*, *Pierre*, and *The Confidence-Man*—all predated the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species* in 1859 as well as the literature of organized secular humanism from the 1900s; however, Darwin was far from being the first to propose a theory of natural systems or biological

---

[21] William Ellery Channing, "Unitarian Christianity," *American Unitarian Conference*, May 5, 1819, accessed November 1, 2015. http://www.americanunitarian.org/unitarianchristianity.htm (emphasis added).

[22] Minot J. Savage, *Our Unitarian Gospel* (Boston: G.H. Ellis, 1898), accessed September 20, 2015, http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/18578/pg18578-images.html (emphasis added).

origins not necessarily reliant on supernaturalism, and twentieth-century secular humanists were not pioneers of a new philosophy so much as organizers and articulators of existing modes of thinking. Both the metaphysical implications that can be drawn from Darwinian evolution and the principal tenets of secular humanism were available to Melville in one form or another from other tributaries of philosophical inquiry and scientific thought. Thus, while Melville may have no connection to the *institutions* of secular humanism that culminated nearly fifty years after his death, his work nevertheless engages secular humanism's *core beliefs*.

The core beliefs of secular humanism are perhaps most straightforwardly presented in the *Humanist Manifesto* of 1933 and subsequent versions in 1973 and 2003. Written by Raymond Bragg with other contributors, the first *Humanist Manifesto* was signed by thirty-four prominent humanist intellectuals and community leaders around the United States, including fifteen Unitarian ministers and leaders. The authors, despite many of them being members of the religious humanist movement and utilizing familiar Unitarian rhetoric, unmistakably advocate for *secular* humanism and focus primarily on activities and attitudes of human significance.[23] They criticize the identification of the word *religion* with "doctrines and methods," which they believe have "lost their significance and which are powerless to solve the problem of human living in the Twentieth Century."[24] They propose instead that religion is simply any "means for realizing the highest values of life."[25]

---

[23] Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, "Secular Humanism and Atheism beyond Progressive Secularism," *Sociology Of Religion* 68, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 407-424.

[24] Kurtz, Paul, ed. *Humanist Manifestos I and II* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1973), 7.

[25] Ibid.

Subsequent secular humanists, aiming to disassociate completely from their religious humanist roots (as well as curb the *Humanist Manifesto*'s unbridled optimism about science and social progress in light of the atrocities of the Holocaust, the nuclear bombing of Japan, Cold War era "doomsday scenarios," and so on) drafted the *Humanist Manifesto II* in 1973, which purges all of the former associations with religious humanism and declares a more self-consciously secular worldview on behalf of organized secular humanism.[26] A third manifesto largely restates and simplifies the core theses of the preceding documents in 2003. Together, these three texts articulate a secular humanist worldview that largely materialized in Melville's lifetime and of which his philosophy was prototypical in the 1850s.

Secular humanism can be defined by the sum of its parts. First, secularism does not necessarily require a commitment to a naturalistic or atheistic worldview; rather, the term 'secular' refers to attitudes, beliefs, ideologies, and practices that pertain to things not spiritual or divine, or at least to things that do not depend upon the spiritual or divine in order to operate in the world. Within this framework, secular humanism establishes human morality as ontologically independent; that is, human goodness does not depend for its existence upon the existence of God, whether or not God does indeed exist.

Humanism, in accordance with the three manifestos, is a commitment to "the positive belief in the possibilities of human progress," a preservation of "the best ethical teachings in the religious traditions of humankind," a rejection of those teachings that "deny humans a full appreciation of their own potentialities and responsibilities," and a

---

[26] Ibid., 14.

concern for the well being of all people in pursuit of the "enhancement of human life."[27]

Moreover, the humanist finds "brotherhood"[†] or social unity to be the peak of human experience, kindness to be the greatest virtue, and fulfillment of human personality and potential to be the highest goal.[28] Each of these ideals and others from the humanist manifestos are embedded in the philosophical conscience of Melville's work, beginning with his idealized secular humanist Ishmael in *Moby Dick* and echoing through his major novels of the 1850s.

---

[27] Ibid., 1-31.

[†] Despite using the gendered term "brotherhood," the authors (presumably) meant to include human beings of all genders in their conception of fellowship, community, or camaraderie. One may note, however, that women were excluded from the creation and signing of the manifestos and from the initial formation and leadership of organized secular humanism. The American Humanist Association has since compiled a commendable record of supporting women's rights, has made progress in involving women in leadership positions, and has recognized more than a dozen women with the Humanist of the Year Award (est. 1953). Nevertheless, all first-hand uses of the terms "brotherhood" and "brotherly love" appear in quotations as a reminder of this history of paternalism and gender exclusion.

[28] Ibid.

Chapter I: Ishmael, Secular Humanist

Although Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* (1882) and its most famous epigram, *Gott ist tot,* were not published until three decades after *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (1851), the philosopher was referring to a cultural shift that he believed had already occurred even before the turn of the nineteenth century, based on his observations of radical changes in human life and thought.[29] Philosophers and literary critics still debate the meaning of Nietzsche's epigram on the death of God, but there is at least some consensus that he was referring to the Judeo-Christian God's role in Western culture being changed or diminished. As Sean Kelly puts it, "[God] no longer plays his traditional social role of organizing us around a commitment to a single right way to live."[30] While *Moby Dick* offers numerous problems to anyone who infers that the author possesses a strictly atheistic worldview, Melville's masterpiece is more compatible with this weaker claim of God's altered role in Western society.

In support of this claim, the characters of *Moby Dick* symbolically deconstruct a whale, yet they do so in an unceremonious and utilitarian fashion. By conquering Leviathan and stripping it bare for practical use, the crew of the *Pequod*—Melville's microcosm of humanity—rises to God's challenge to his faithful victim Job.[31] Lawrance Thompson correlates the step-by-step dismantling and utilizing of the body of an old, sick

---

[29] Sean D. Kelly, "Navigating Past Nihilism," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Dec. 5, 2010. http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/12/05/navigating-past-nihilism/

[30] Ibid.

[31] Job 41:1-34 (*King James Bible*)

whale with God's "taunting insistence that Leviathan is inscrutable and untouchable," finding the crew's thoroughness in putting every possible part of the whale to some sort of human-serving (and, in the case of the 'Cassock,' smugly sacrilegious) use to be a sarcastic method by which Melville ridicules "the orthodox Christian dogma that the Holy Bible is the infallible Word of God."[32] Despite this dismantling of Leviathan, the unconquered Moby Dick—a beacon of ambiguity, according to Ishmael, and the key to metaphysical truth, according to Ahab—continues to elude understanding. The dissection of the old, sick whale, symbolic of Nietzsche's culturally diminished Judeo-Christian God and his gospel, does not infer the non-existence of divinity or things beyond our understanding. It does, however, challenge the infallibility of the gospel and Christendom's understanding of God.

Both Ishmael and Ahab face an ontological crisis, but the two characters develop drastically opposing strategies to navigate this uncertainty. Ishmael combines his humanist ideals with a crucial ability to compromise, which empowers him to accept the limits of human understanding, to deal with ambiguity, and to recognize the finite nature of humanity, all the while striving to foster the unity of humankind. Ahab, whose first encounter with Moby Dick instills him with unanswerable questions about fate and the nature of reality, suppresses his own humanist drive in his effort to discover an *absolute*—some unchangeable and self-existent feature of the world, particularly the confirmed existence or non-existence of fate or divinity—and he prioritizes the sovereignty of the individual over the well being of the community.

---

[32] Lawrance Thompson, *Melville's Quarrel With God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 214.

Ishmael's Humanist Conversion

Ishmael's worldview is founded on a personal religious tradition, but this tradition fails to satisfy his innate desire for human connection. Before boarding the *Pequod*, Ishmael, a soul-searcher attempting to stave off suicidal thoughts by going to sea, attends a sermon by renowned minister Father Mapple. First, the image of Father Mapple's church is bleak in its complete lack of fellowship. The congregation is made up of "silent islands of men and women" scattered around the pews, with "each silent worshipper… purposely sitting apart from the other, as if each silent grief were insular and incommunicable."[33] All persons present (except for Queequeg, unable to interpret the written language) are solemnly contemplating marble tablets that bear memorials of sailors and ships lost at sea, which seem to "gnaw upon all Faith" and cause "old wounds [to] bleed afresh" (*MD*, 41). During the sermon, Father Mapple is distant and impregnable in his nautically themed pulpit during the sermon and casts woe upon those who are "castaways" (*MD*, 54). Afterwards, he covers his face in his hands and drops to his knees in silence until he is "left all alone in the place" (*MD*, 54). This dynamic of isolation is recreated in the social environment of the *Pequod*, as Captain Ahab spends much of the beginning of the voyage impregnable in his quarters, while the crew is comprised of "nearly all *Isolatoes*… not acknowledging a common continent of men, but each *Isolato* living on a separate continent of his own" (*MD*, 131).

Furthermore, the content of Father Mapple's sermon, in which the famed minister recounts the biblical story of Jonah in dramatic detail and with gripping oratorical power, includes no attempt to unify the island-like members of his congregation, but rather

---

[33] Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 39. Subsequent references will be to this edition by page number and the abbreviation *MD*.

condemns and ultimately disappoints. In his introduction to the sermon, Father Mapple remarks that the book of Jonah, despite being at four chapters one of the "smallest strands in the mighty cable of the Scriptures," is nevertheless the "boisterously grand" bearer of a "pregnant lesson" that reaches remarkable "depths of the soul" (*MD*, 47). Such promises are not delivered upon as, despite the narrative mastery with which he recounts the story of Jonah, Father Mapple's analysis delivers little more than a basic Calvinist message: "Sin not; but if you do… repent" (*MD*, 52). Even the blessings at the end of the sermon, which Father Mapple delivers with "deep joy in his eyes," depict God as disciplinary: "Eternal delight" to him who "can say with his final breath—O Father!—*Chiefly known to me by Thy rod*—mortal or immortal, here I die" (*MD*, 52; emphasis added). Ishmael's most direct interaction with Protestant Christianity in the novel, therefore, is a solemn encounter with isolation, grief, disappointment, guilt, and mortality.

Upon leaving Father Mapple's chapel and reuniting with the pagan Queequeg at the Spouter-Inn, Ishmael experiences a sort of conversion brought about by breaking the isolation of the "lonely room" and interacting with his once and future bedfellow: "I felt a melting in me. No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This Soothing savage had redeemed it" (*MD*, 57). Ishmael's conversion is not a religious experience but a human experience, which causes him to adjust his priorities and reject his former prejudices, evidenced by his choice to "try a pagan friend… since Christian kindness has proved a hollow courtesy" (*MD*, 57). When signaled by Queequeg to join him in worship of an idol, Ishmael weighs his upbringing in the "infallible" Presbyterian Church (and presumably the reverberant message of sin and repentance from Father Mapple's sermon) against his desire and emerging priority for

human connection and fellowship. Ishmael finds it impossible that the "magnanimous God of heaven and earth—pagans and all included" could be jealous of a small wooden idol, and he redefines *worship* as doing the will of God—specifically God's will to uphold the 'Golden Rule' espoused in the teachings of Jesus Christ, which Ishmael paraphrases as the will to "do to my fellow man what I would have my fellow man do to me" (*MD*, 58). Because Ishmael would have Queequeg would join him in his own Presbyterian form of worship, he concludes via application of this Golden Rule that he therefore ought to "turn idolater" to fulfill the will of God (*MD*, 58).

Ishmael's decision is partly a weighing of Old Testament commandments, which forbid idolatry, against New Testament teachings of Jesus Christ, which encourage above all else love for God and love for others; however, Ishmael's new evaluation of morality is also an adoption of humanist priorities above religious doctrine. Despite his demonstrated familiarity with the Old Testament and therein his implied knowledge of its depiction of the Judeo-Christian God as a jealous God, Ishmael reinterprets scripture based on what he perceives to be a higher guiding principle of human kindness and decides that God's call to love others is more important than keeping the commandments. Emphasizing this dilemma is the history of Ishmael's own Presbyterianism, which at its Calvinist roots has an especially vigilant history of opposing idolatry through iconoclasm—the physical destruction of icons, statues, and other revered objects—even to the point of committing violence against other Christians to combat what they believed to be idolatrous religious practice.[34] Given the weight of this decision, Ishmael's choice to worship Queequeg's idol at the expense of doctrinal obedience is significant because it

---

[34] Carlos M.N. Eire, *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 303-305.

signals his embrace of an emerging humanist ideal within himself as he rejects Father Mapple's charge to 'sin not' in order to requite Queequeg's "brotherly love."

Furthermore, Ishmael rejects Father Mapple's definition of the will of God—that "we must disobey ourselves" in order to "obey God" and follow his commands—and prioritizes his capacity for positive human experience above doctrinal responsibility (*MD*, 48). Therein, Ishmael preempts the writers of the *Humanist Manifesto II*, who accept the teachings of religion only insofar as they promote human well being, while condemning religious activities or beliefs that "place revelation, God, ritual, or creed above human needs and experience" and perform "a disservice to the human species" by inhibiting humans from "helping themselves or experiencing their full potentialities."[35] The inhibitions of guilt and condemnation are relinquished then in Ishmael's pursuit of a human connection that would allow him to experience his full potential as part of a "loving pair" with Queequeg (*MD*, 58). As a result of his humanist conversion, Ishmael is redeemed—that is, his connection with Queequeg offers him a chance to break free from his own status as an *Isolato* and achieve fellowship in a way that was evidently unavailable to the members of Father Mapple's congregation. Thus, Ishmael decisively abandons religious dogma to act in a way that promotes human unity, demonstrates love for self and others, values the human need for companionship, and allows him to experience his full potential by bringing him out of his insulating prejudice and isolation.

Ishmael's Declaration of Faith

Following this conversion from fundamentalist religious commitment, Ishmael adopts the rhetoric of humanism in his own declaration of faith, preaching tolerance,

---

[35] Kurtz, *Humanist Manifestos I and II*, 7.

acceptance, and unity to dismantle the prejudices of others. As Ishmael and Queequeg approach the *Pequod*, Captains Bildad and Peleg confront them, identifying Queequeg as a "son of darkness" and a "Philistine" and referring to his many tattoos of "devil's blue" as a sign that he has not been "baptized right" (*MD*, 96-97). The captains command the pair to present documentation proving Queequeg's religious conversion—symbolic of assimilation into the United States' mainstream religious and cultural values—in order to prove his eligibility to board the ship. In response to the captains' prejudices against and suspicions of Queequeg, Ishmael acts on behalf of his newfound humanism by exercising rhetoric familiar to Unitarianism. He wards off the captains' charges by appealing to the common ground of membership in "the same ancient Catholic Church" to which "all of us, and every mother's son and soul belong; the great and everlasting First Congregation of this whole worshipping world" (*MD*, 96-97). Certainly this declaration, which Ishmael improvises to escape being caught in an equivocation, is not without notes of sarcasm; however, his appeals are sincere enough to persuade, if not proselytize, the captains to accept Queequeg as he is, paganism and all.

Ishmael's declaration of faith departs from Father Mapple's sermon in two crucial ways. First, Ishmael embraces Queequeg's religious and cultural difference, whereas Father Mapple's sermon finds no room to reconcile Queequeg's own demonstrations of communal love with the impossibility for his salvation on account of his devout paganism. Secondly, Ishmael values Queequeg's humanist qualities above his religious affiliations, whereas Father Mapple demands unflinching commitment to the "truth" and condemns "disobedience of the command of God" (*MD*, 47-54). Father Mapple is someone who believes that he "knows exactly… who God is [and] what he expects" from

human beings, Brian Yothers observes, so his message of divine certainty stands in contrast to Ishmael's promotion of religious difference throughout the novel.[36] Ishmael's point, Yothers argues, exposes Melville's sense of "universal human communion that transcends racial, cultural, and religious difference."[37] Such acceptance of religious difference is familiar to readers of Melville's earlier works, particularly *Typee* (1846), as the author frequently interacts with the concept of the 'noble savage,' or the notion that 'primitive' people are more pure or virtuous because they live free from the corrupting influence of civilization.[38] Even though Melville never affirms the truth of the conception of the 'noble savage,' his engagement with the idea demonstrates his willingness to consider members of other religions and cultures for their merits, while his overt condemnation of Christian missionaries and their evangelical tactics shows his resistance to the project of global religious and cultural homogenization.

Although he offers no declaration of his own, Queequeg's own humanist instinct appears to match Ishmael's. Susan McWilliams observes that Queequeg "thinks differently about interdependence" than his crewmates, and that this positive difference is apparent in his unhesitating action to save a drowning man, his comfortable dependence on Ishmael when connected by a lifeline, and his willingness to rely on others, especially the carpenter who makes his coffin for him, when ailing nearly to the point of death.[39] Queequeg's ability to depend on others without humiliation sets him apart from the

---

[36] Brian Yothers, *Sacred Uncertainty: Religious Difference and the Shape of Melville's Career* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 82.

[37] Ibid., 76.

[38] Andrew Delbanco, *Melville: His World and Work* (New York: Vintage, 2005), 86.

[39] Susan McWilliams, "Ahab, American," *The Review of Politics* 74 (2012): 233-260. 243-244.

"American" crewmembers and particularly Captain Ahab, McWilliams determines, because he is not indoctrinated into the isolating effects of capitalistic individualism and instead embodies an attitude characterized by embrace of human community and interdependence.[40]

By this interpretation, Ishmael's declaration is not only a device to persuade the captains to adopt religious toleration, but also a genuine expression of belonging to a unified humanity that transcends cultural and religious boundaries, and by assigning Queequeg the venerable role of Deacon in this ancient church of the "whole worshipping world," Ishmael praises the genuine humanist spirit with which his friend is inherently endowed (*MD*, 455-456). Thus, the captains concede Ishmael's humanist appeals despite the fact that Queequeg is not a member of the congregation of Deacon Deuteronomy—a significant name, as the book of Deuteronomy contains a charge from Moses to the Israelites urging them to observe the law of God and imposing upon them the need for exclusive allegiance to the Judeo-Christian God.[41] Ishmael's declaration abhors the rejection of Queequeg based on his non-allegiance to the Judeo-Christian God and submits his membership in humanity as his essential quality.

Ishmael's Communion

In one of the most significant passages in *Moby Dick*, Ishmael and other crewmates are assigned the task of dissolving lumps of aromatic spermaceti from a recently killed whale to keep the substance from solidifying before it can be processed. The oily substance is pleasantly aromatic (like the "smell of spring violets") and it softens and moisturizes Ishmael's hands as he methodically finds "soft, gentle globules" and

---

[40] Ibid.

[41] Deut. 6:4-15 (*King James Bible*)

squeezes them back into liquid (*MD*, 455-456). Following the "bitter exertion" of the whale-hunt, this task becomes a means by which Ishmael experiences a sort of transcendence that empties him of "ill-will, or petulance, or malice, of any sort whatsoever" and allows him to baptize himself and wash his hands and heart of the "horrible oath" to pursue Moby Dick (*MD*, 455-456). Following this baptism, Ishmael actively partakes in a ceremonial manifestation of the universal communion alluded to in his declaration as he mistakenly squeezes his crewmates' hands in search of the globules:

> Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving, feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much to say,—Oh! my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come; let us all squeeze hands all round, nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness (*MD*, 455-456).

Critics have been quick to acknowledge the masturbatory and homoerotic implications of this passage, particularly Melville's punning on the word 'sperm,' while others interpret Ishmael's stated desire for universal human convergence to be an instance of satirized idealism or playful irony.[42] Despite this analytical focus on the innuendo and ironic tone, most readers still find Ishmael's call to unity and message of communal love to be an authentic gesture: Howard P. Vincent finds this scene to be a crucial balance between the "isolato theme" and the "companionship theme;" Debra J. Rosenthal reads the passage as a sentimental appeal employed as part of a larger strategy for encouraging unity and thus salvation; Kristen Boudreau considers the act of squeezing "into each

---

[42] For example, see Robert Shulman, "The Serious Functions of Melville's Phallic Jokes," *American Literature* 33 no. 2 (May, 1961): 179-194.

other" to be universalist "homogenizing" of humans into a transcendent fellowship.[43] Some in-depth analyses reconcile both the overt and covert meanings by identifying a single goal, such as Robert Shulman's examination, which finds that by couching a message of universal "brotherly love" in the language of "deviant sexuality," Ishmael manages to affirm his "Christian brotherhood" while simultaneously conveying his rejection of the social norms policed by Protestant society.[44]

Whether or not the subversive features of this passage are central to its purpose or merely serve as comic relief between the darker passages preceding (Pip being lost at sea and going mad) and following (a demonic portrait of the *Pequod* and near capsizing of the ship by Ishmael), Ishmael's actions and expressions both motivate and support his call for universal unity and kindness and thus represent Ishmael at the highest watermark of his "attainable felicity" and at the peak of his humanist sentiment (*MD*, 456). This communion establishes Ishmael's ability to break free from his status as an *isolato*—not only as part of a 'loving pair' with Queequeg, but also as part of a greater, all-inclusive fellowship with the diverse crew of the *Pequod*. While squeezing the hands of his shipmates, Ishmael joins the fellowship referred to in his own declaration on the universal communion of all people: "in *that* we all join hands" (*MD*, 97; emphasis in the original).

Ahab and the 'Sovereignty of Self'

Individualism as a principle for independence and self-reliance is an emergent product of "American" rhetoric and democratic ideals in the United States, culminating in

---

[43] Howard P. Vincent, *The Trying-Out of Moby Dick* (New York: Southern Illinois Press, 1949), 328; Debra J. Rosenthal, "The Sentimental Appeal to Salvific Paternity in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Moby-Dick*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 56, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 135-147; Kristen Boudreau, *Sympathy in American Literature: American Sentiments from Jefferson to the Jameses* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 207.

[44] Shulman, "The Serious Functions," 184.

a culture that precipitates personal isolation. Robert D. Putnam finds that individualism consistently outweighs community in the political hagiology of the United States, noting that liberation from community bonds is an honored theme in United States culture, that the United States' national myths "often exaggerate the role of individual heroes and understate the importance of collective effort," and that this reverence for "rugged individualism" persists in contemporary literature, film, and politics.[45] Despite the community-building role that churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, and other religious organizations play in the United States, this culture of individualism pervades religious rhetoric and practice as well as shapes civic life. Melville captures this aspect of "American" religion in the sermon of Father Mapple, who delivers a message of individualism to the *Isolatoes* in his congregation: "Delight is to him… who against the proud gods and commodores of this earth, ever stands forth his own inexorable self."[46]

Humanism in the United States is not exempt from this culture of individualism, as it remains highly concerned with the democratic freedom and wellbeing of the individual; however, humanism's emphasis on fulfilling a universal goal of fellowship distinguishes it from 'rugged individualism' as a guiding principle for social and civic interaction. Many critics have noted this contrast between humanism and individualism in Melville's work. McWilliams finds this contrast to be the basis of Melville's criticism of the individualistic ideals of Transcendentalism: "The picture that Melville draws of American citizens in *Moby-Dick* is a kind of Emersonian paradise… a society in which individual insulation is the standard mode of being," but which in Melville's portrayal is

---

[45] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 24.

[46] Ibid., 54.

"deeply problematic."[47] Similarly, Ray Browne, in his well-known exploration of humanist themes in Melville's work, considers the central theme of *Moby Dick* to be the conflict between the individual and the mass, with Ishmael's humanism representing the latter.[48] If Ishmael represents the ideal of community, Ahab is the prime candidate to represent the ideal of individualism.

Ahab's own 'inexorable self' and his obsession with transcending the limits of human capabilities together culminate in a sort of Promethean sense of self. In a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, Melville himself advances this interpretation of Ahab, explaining, "He may perish; but so long as he exists, he insists upon treating with all Powers upon an equal basis."[49] Thompson elaborates this Promethean quality, attributing to Ahab an attitude that "[glorifies] in its own divine attributes so persistently" that "no… God-bullying could ever impair the sovereignty of self."[50] Ahab may delight in the best features of humankind, but to achieve his individualist goal, he dominates the will of the crew and thus rejects the communal goals of humanism.

Ahab is not without his own humanist instincts, but his drive for individualism overpowers his desire for human connection. Ahab confronts a symbolic opportunity for human connection similar to that of Ishmael's 'communion' when, right before beginning the three-day chase of Moby Dick, Ahab draws Starbuck near to him: "Starbuck; let me look into a human eye; it is better than to gaze into sea or sky; better than to gaze upon

---

[47] McWilliams, "Ahab, American," 241.

[48] Ray B. Browne, *Melville's Drive to Humanism* (Lafayette: Purdue, 1971).

[49] Herman Melville, "To Nathaniel Hawthorne, 16 April (?), 1851, Pittsfield," *The Writings of Herman Melville: Correspondence*, edited by Lynn Horth (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 184-187, 186.

[50] Thomson, *Melville's Quarrel with God*, 233.

God" (*MD*, 591-592). Despite presenting himself with the opportunity to abandon his individualistic drive and embrace Starbuck's offer to return to his wife and child, Ahab instead turns away, questioning the "nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing" that commands him in his monomaniacal quest and makes him "do what in [his] own proper, natural heart [he] durst not so much as dare," leading him to question, "Is Ahab, Ahab?" (*MD*, 591-592). Here Ahab examines his self-alienation in words similar to those of Paul of Tarsus in the book of Romans: "For that which I do I allow not… but what I hate, that I do."[51] Ahab loathes but, because of his fierce individualism, cannot leave the "desolation of solitude" that has made him "more demon than man" and keeps him pushing against "all natural lovings and longings" for human connection (*MD*, 590-592).

Thus individualism, here an opposing ideology to Ishmael's humanism, drives Ahab to his demise. Whereas Ishmael is able to cleanse himself of his oath and break free from his isolation (if only temporarily) by squeezing the hands of his shipmates while desiring to converge all people into a single loving being, Ahab fails to 'squeeze' himself into Starbuck during his own aborted communion. He remains an *Isolato* as a result of his unshakable commitment to his individualistic goals and ultimately sacrifices the lives of his crew on the altar of his 'sovereignty of self' and his pursuit of personal fulfillment.

Ishmael's Compromise

Critics commonly ask why Ishmael of all the potential candidates aboard the *Pequod* is the one to survive and narrate the story; in this line of inquiry, any traits that distinguish Ishmael from the other members of the crew may hold the answer. Among a cast of characters comprised of 'nearly all isolatoes,' Ishmael's most distinguishing

---

[51] Rom. 7:15 (*King James Bible*)

feature is his genuine love for humanity and his embrace of human connection, especially

with Queequeg, but also with the other spermaceti-squeezing crewmembers with whom

he experiences his transcendent moment. There is, however, another important aspect of

Ishmael's humanism that deserves examination: the ability to compromise. Unitarianism

in the mid-nineteenth century, as well as some branches of twentieth-century secular

humanism, frequently received criticism for encapsulating their humanist message of

acceptance and open-mindedness in a dogmatic and uncompromising form, encouraging

both homogenized ritual and doctrine as a conduit for unity.[52] Contrastingly, Ishmael

repeatedly advocates an idealized "indifference of agnostic detachment" both in one's

metaphysical worldview and in one's value system, as Thompson observes.[53]

In a show of compromise, Ishmael cautions against commitment to both belief

and unbelief, finding that such attitudes create an imbalanced perspective: "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 an equal eye" (*MD*,

409). Ishmael is capable of living with ambiguity and human limitations; this capability

inoculates him against the urge toward absolute truth or toward complete reduction of his

ontology to self-existent features of reality.

Ishmael demonstrates this capability in his meditation on Moby Dick, wherein he

determines that it is the "whiteness of the whale" that alarms him most (*MD* 204).

Ishmael views the color white as representative of the ambiguous nature of reality,

perceiving white to be both the absence of color and the "concrete of every color," likely

---

[52] This criticism continues to plague contemporary secular humanism. See Richard Bastien, "The Intolerance of Humanism" *Challenge* (February, 1990): 23-24.

[53] Thompson, *Melville's Quarrel with God*, 240.

evidenced to him by the separation of white light through a prism (*MD*, 212). Ishmael also finds ambiguity in numerous associations with the color white, contrasting its positive associations with "divine spotlessness and power" including the "very veil of the Christian deity" alongside negative associations with "terrors" like polar bears and great white sharks and "strangely hideous" appearance of "albino" persons (*MD*, 205-212). Instead of curiosity, Ishmael concludes with caution: "Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?" (*MD*, 212). By asking this question, Ishmael implies that there are limits to human understanding or human capability and that this boundary ought to be observed. Through this meditation, Ishmael recognizes and respects that there are potentially irreconcilable ambiguities in the white whale and thus in reality.

Contrastingly, Ahab hates all things inscrutable and refuses to concede that such things must remain unknown: "All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks… If man will strike, strike through the mask! How else can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall" (*MD*, 178). Ishmael's positive agnosticism involves not knowing whether or not human value is an objective or intrinsic feature of the world, but his acceptance of ambiguity keeps him stable, whereas Ahab's unattainable desire to 'strike through the mask' and fully comprehend the nature of reality intensifies his obsession with Moby Dick to the point of madness. Despite still participating in the 'fiery hunt,' Ishmael remains unbound by his "horrible oath" to Ahab, having "washed [his] hands and [his] heart" of it in his spermaceti baptism (*MD*, 455-456)." Instead, Ishmael realigns his priorities around humanity, which is knowable, as opposed to divinity, which is not.

Even Queequeg, despite the humanist spirit with which he is endowed, refuses to compromise on metaphysical positions. When discussing religion with Queequeg, Ishmael finds him to be "dull of hearing on that important subject, unless considered from his own point of view" (*MD*, 95). Furthermore, Queequeg seems to pity Ishmael for being "lost to evangelical pagan piety," as Ishmael notes, "[Queequeg] no doubt thought he knew a good deal more about the true religion than I did. He looked at me with a sort of condescending concern and compassion" (*MD*, 95). This term 'true religion' is a reference not only to the rhetoric of Christian missionaries who evangelized to communities comprised of pagans (believers of 'false religion') like Queequeg, but also, as John Lardas Modern explains, to antebellum religious philosophy in which 'true religion' denoted democratized aspects of faith accessible to all through the use of 'common sense' in practical life.[54]

Queequeg then mirrors numerous facets of Protestant Christianity, subversively redressed in pagan guise. Just as Protestant Christianity fragmented based on doctrinal disputes—that is, claims of certainty regarding interpretations of a vague and multiply interpretable text—Queequeg remains uncompromising in his religious and metaphysical position despite being unable to read for himself the doctrine of his faith, which is tattooed on his skin and which he carves into the coffin that assists Ishmael's survival. Queequeg, like the uncompromising Protestants who perish aboard the *Pequod*, accepts his own culturally dominant religion as 'true religion' and pities those with differing religious commitments, whereas Ishmael proves willing to participate in Queequeg's worship and to navigate religious difference with an open heart. Queequeg does attend

---

[54] Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*, 79-81.

Father Mapple's sermon, but his perception of the chapel mirrors the patronizing attitude of Christian missionaries toward 'uncivilized' pagans; that is, Queequeg observes everything with a "wondering gaze of incredulous curiosity," which signals at best an anthropological interest (*MD*, 41).

Queequeg, Ahab, and all others aboard the *Pequod* are therefore drowned under the weight of their disappointed metaphysical expectations upon encountering the white whale, a symbol of metaphysical ambiguity and the limits of human understanding, whereas Ishmael's detachment removes him from Ahab's boat in the final chase (he is "dropped astern") and equips him to survive by floating on Queequeg's coffin (*MD*, 625). This morbid "life-buoy" is not only a reward for Ishmael's communion and "brotherly love" with Queequeg, but also the platform of a religious viewpoint different from Ishmael's own—the tattoo markings that Queequeg etched into the coffin (*MD*, 625). Thus Ishmael is saved, in part due to his message of humanism that enabled Queequeg— the maker of the life-saving coffin—to board the ship despite his religious difference, and in part due to his ability to accept ambiguity, to consider other points of view, and to maintain an objective balance between belief and doubt.

Ishmael, Secular Humanist

The worldview held and articulated by Ishmael anticipates the course of twentieth century secular humanism. Although his personal belief system is complicated and certainly stems from a foundation of religion, Ishmael's secular humanism persists in each stage of his ideological development: he prioritizes human connection above religious doctrine in his moment of 'conversion' and subsequent idolatry with Queequeg; he accepts religious and cultural difference, emphasizes human value, and expresses

belonging to a unified humanity in his 'declaration of faith' to Bildad and Peleg; he participates in universal sodality and experiences transcendent 'communion' with his shipmates in a spermaceti baptism. Moreover, Ishmael accepts the ambiguity of metaphysical reality, commits to a moral system ontologically independent of divinity, and rejects individualism as a guiding principle. Ishmael therefore, regardless of his religious affiliation, is quintessentially secular humanist.

Ishmael may be Melville's representation of an *ideal* humanist. That is not to say, however, that Melville shares Ishmael's ideals completely, or that he embeds his own worldview within Ishmael's. Indeed, readers are often too eager to conflate characters with their authors. Melville approaches secular humanism with the same skepticism with which he engages Unitarianism and other moral and metaphysical positions. While Melville consistently advocates for some key features of secular humanism in his major works, he puts the ideology to the test in his novels after *Moby Dick* and expresses serious doubts. If anything, Melville finds secular humanism to be compelling theoretically, but, echoing a common criticism of humanism, he shows it to be problematic in practice. Such doubts are hinted at in *Moby Dick*—for example, Ishmael's humanist position fails to save his fellow crewmates aboard the *Pequod*—but Melville confronts his doubts more directly in his story of another young idealist, the eponymous protagonist of *Pierre*.

Chapter II: *Pierre* and the Dark Side of Idealism

Less than a year after the publication of *Moby Dick*, which was fraught with editorial issues and resulted in poor reviews and underwhelming sales, Melville wrote what was intended to be a novel "calculated for popularity" to appease his publishers and win back readers.[55] To their dismay, however, *Pierre: or, The Ambiguities* (1852)—a domestic tale in the vein of popular romanticism referred to by Melville as a "rural bowl of milk" in a letter to Sophia Hawthorne—is instead a puzzling psychological tragedy interrupted by philosophical digressions.[56]

In the novel, Pierre Glendenning, the teenage son of a wealthy widow, breaks off his idyllic engagement to Lucy Tartan after meeting the mysterious orphan Isabel, who claims to be the illegitimate daughter of his late father. For a variety of motives, including his self-sacrificial drive to Christian charity, his suppressed sexual desire for Isabel, and his choice to preserve his cherished father's memory, Pierre pretends to elope with Isabel. After his mother disowns him, Pierre leaves behind his pastoral home in Saddle Meadows and moves to the city along with Isabel and a woman named Delly, the disgraced mother of a deceased illegitimate child. They first seek hospitality from Pierre's cousin (and boyhood lover) Glen Stanley, but Glen betrays Pierre by refusing to recognize him. So they move into the Church of the Apostles—a repurposed church

---

[55] William C. Spengemann, introduction to *Pierre: or, The Ambiguities*, by Herman Melville (New York: Penguin, 1996), vii-xx, vii.

[56] Herman Melville, "To Sophia Peabody Hawthorne, 8 January 1852, New York," *The Writings of Herman Melville: Correspondence*, edited by Lynn Horth (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 218-220, 219.

serving as apartments for penniless idealist reformers, philosophers, and artists. Pierre attempts to provide for Isabel and Delly by working as an author, but has little success. After being informed of his mother's death, torn between Isabel and Lucy (who follows him to the city), sued by his publisher, threatened and insulted by Lucy's brothers and his cousin Glen, and disillusioned with his own decisions, Pierre murders Glen in a public square. Lucy and Isabel visit him in prison, and with melodramatic flourish, Lucy dies from shock upon hearing Isabelle call Pierre her brother, and Pierre and Isabel commit suicide by drinking poison.

At first glance, *Pierre* seems a major departure for Melville as it contrasts with his prior work not only in genre and setting, but also in style, structure, and point-of-view. Many twentieth-century critics, echoing the novel's early sensationalist reviews, find this departure to be severe enough to support claims of deterioration in Melville's mental health.[57] Stylistic differences and psychological diagnoses aside, however, *Pierre* directly continues the thematic explorations central to *Moby Dick*, as William B. Dillingham succinctly explains: "the mode of expression is different, but what is being expressed is the same."[58] So what was it that Melville felt had been left so unresolved in *Moby Dick* that compelled him to write yet another long, philosophical novel?[59]

---

[57] Countless critics support some version of this madness narrative, including some influential twentieth-century Melvillians: Newton Arvin, *Herman Melville* (New York: Sloane, 1950); F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968).

[58] William B. Dillingham, *Melville's Later Novels* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 148.

[59] I am indebted to Philip F. Gura for posing this question in one of our invaluable discussions.

Pursuing this inquiry, some critics approach *Pierre* as a sequel to *Moby Dick* rather than as a self-contained or independently valuable creation.[60] But *Pierre* is not a recreation of so much as a reaction to *Moby Dick*—an alternate approach to the inquiries and assumptions of the whaling novel, which marks a shift in Melville's philosophical concerns from metaphysics to problems in value theory, as some critics have previously noted.[61] Furthermore, each novel contains a tragic hero, but instead of reformulating Ahab's demise in a pastoral setting, the tragedy here befalls Pierre—a youthful idealist not unlike Ishmael. While Pierre certainly shares important traits with the egomaniacal and monomaniacal captain of the *Pequod*, his downfall is in many ways the "opposite of Ahab's," F.O. Matthiessen explains, because it comes from "[following] unswervingly his generous impulses" instead of Ahab-like egomania, so his destruction results from being "full of sympathy [and] careless of himself."[62] Pierre shares many of Ishmael's humanist ideals, but instead of serving as the protagonist's saving grace, this very idealism contributes to his demise.

---

[60] Tellingly, Spengemann begins his introduction to the 1996 Penguin Classics edition of *Pierre* by asserting that if *Pierre* were not written by the author of *Moby-Dick*, then "one suspects the book would go off the market… accompanied by sighs of relief" (vii). Recent critics have been more receptive, finding that *Pierre*, despite its narrative shortcomings, is one of Melville's major works. To his credit, Spengemann admits that the novel is significant as an example of early modernism and is thus a psychological literary experiment ahead of its time.

[61] Emory Elliott, for example, claims, "*Pierre* does not engage to any extent in the metaphysical, religious, and philosophical issues" of *Moby Dick*; instead, he finds the focus of *Pierre* to be "moral and ethical responsibility, especially for those with position and wealth." While I disagree with Elliott about the novel's *complete* lack of metaphysical and religious engagement, his observation about ethics in *Pierre* is well founded. Emory Elliott, "Wandering To-and-Fro": Melville and Religion," *A Historical Guide to Herman Melville*, edited by Giles Gunn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 167-204, 193.

[62] F.O. Matthiessen, "The Troubled Mind: An American Hamlet," in *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 467.

Pierre's Awakening

Pierre is divided into two distinct sections, beginning with the pastoral scenery of Saddle Meadows and its population of Protestant Christians and transitioning to an industrial city where Pierre houses himself among a group of secular reformers. Many of *Pierre*'s critics consider the protagonist's journey from the rural warmth of country into the cold urbanity of the city to be exemplary of a nineteenth-century trope symbolizing the industrialization of the United States, which, as Samuel Otter observes, is often depicted as a transformation "from rural golden age to urban wasteland."[63] Others have noticed, however, that the rural-urban dichotomy in *Pierre* is markedly more complicated. Otter argues, "Saddle Meadows is not the site of innocence but the intersections of intense political, patriarchal, and sexual anxieties," noting that the "explicit rhetoric of rural paradise" is repeatedly challenged by "displacements, overstatements, anticlimaxes, and the mingling of categories."[64] Spengemann concurs, finding Pierre's life at Saddle Meadows to be both delightful and horribly false, and calling it "a lovely delusion made ghastly" by its falsity.[65] Nicola Nixon too finds the rural in *Pierre* to be "no Walden-like retreat from urban strife;" rather, it is the site of the "the grossest disparities in class and privilege."[66]

Similarly, while the city is portrayed as dark, cold, and full of madness, it is also the locale of democratic egalitarianism. Nixon, examining the political aspects of the

---

[63] Samuel Otter, "The Eden of Saddle Meadows: Landscape and Ideology in *Pierre*," *American Literature* 66, no. 1 (Mar. 1994): 55-81. 55-56.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Spengemann, Introduction to *Pierre*, xi.

[66] Nicola Nixon, "Compromising Politics and Herman Melville's *Pierre*," *American Literature* 69, no. 4 (Dec., 1997): 719-741, 731.

rural-urban dichotomy, interprets Pierre's 'Crossing of the Rubicon' as moving "from pastoral feudalism to urban democracy, abandoning his paternal birthright... to become the embodiment of the much-celebrated Emersonian self-reliant man."[67] Nixon notes, however, that this personal revolution—"exchanging one American social order for another," as she says—does not settle which order is morally superior because the protagonist fails to actually investigate either one.[68] Given the complexities of this dichotomy, the two sections of the novel can be distinguished from one another in numerous ways: culturally, politically, economically, ideologically, and even stylistically. Regardless of the difficulties Pierre faces in the city, his move from Saddle Meadows illustrates his inner transition from naïve contentment to pained awareness—an epiphany he never wishes undone.

Much like Ishmael's transformative moment during his befriending of Queequeg, Pierre too has a life-changing, perspective-altering experience upon learning from Isabel's letter that she may be his half-sister, thus alleging that his father—his idealized god-figure—is an adulterer. Pierre's 'awakening' is not a burst of positive emotion akin to the internal 'melting' described by Ishmael; rather, it is a violent, painful jolt from blissful ignorance into miserable wisdom. This new perspective, like a clarifying bolt of lightning, transfigures the "long-cherished image of his father... from a green foliaged tree into a blasted trunk" and exposes his mother's seemingly unconditional love as merely the "glittering folds of pride."[69] Pierre sees all preceding ambiguities "ripped open

---

[67] Ibid., 727.

[68] Ibid., 728.

[69] Herman Melville, *Pierre: or, The Ambiguities* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 88-90. Subsequent references will be to this edition by page number and the abbreviation *P*.

as if with a keen sword," and realizes the great psychological cost of this epiphany as he envisions the arrival of "thickening phantoms of an infinite gloom" (*P*, 85).

Pierre's loss of innocence, like Adam and Eve's in the book of Genesis, coincides with his acquisition of 'knowledge of good and evil.'[70] Through this new knowledge, Adam and Eve become aware of their own nakedness; Pierre becomes aware of his own deficit—not of clothing, but of discernment of truth and falsity. The former clothe their nakedness; Pierre "tear[s] all veils" from his former idols and resolves to "see the hidden things" (*P*, 66). And as Adam and Eve are cast out of the Garden of Eden, beginning the fallen state of humankind, so Pierre is exiled from Saddle Meadows, never to return to the Edenic state of his former life; from Pierre's perspective, however, it is Saddle Meadows—not himself—that has become spiritually fallen.

Being stripped of his illusions divorces Pierre not only from his idyllic youth, but also from all features of his reality, symbolized by his blurring, cross-eyed vision: "On all sides, the physical world of solid objects now slidingly displaced itself from around him, and he floated into an ether of visions" (*P*, 85). The narrator finds this displacement to be a needed correction: "Ere his great grief came upon him, all the objects which surrounded him were concealingly deceptive" (*P*, 88-90). Pierre's break with his idealized life is severe to such an extent that he begins to disassociate objects from their given meanings, creating a distrust of reality and turning his world into one of perpetual epistemic confusion. Despite this condition, Pierre refuses to apply his newfound skepticism to his foundational principles, so his distrust of everything from his familial and social identity to ordinary objects does not induce him to question the nature of his moral values nor to

---

[70] Gen. 3:22-24 (*King James Bible*)

doubt the existence of absolute truth, as demonstrated by his resolution: "Henceforth, I will know nothing but truth, glad Truth, or sad Truth. I will know what *is*" (*P*, 65; emphasis in the original).

Pierre's condition is largely demonstrative of Melville's own religious and artistic crises in his post-*Moby Dick* disappointment. Charles N. Watson, Jr. believes that Pierre's revelation reflects Melville's own emerging pessimism and dismay as a professional writer, beginning with the author's perception that his family, his publisher, and his readers had betrayed him.[71] Watson identifies several dimensions to this overall 'darkening' of Melville's life and work, including "religious disillusionment… an increasing skepticism about the benevolence and even the existence of God," artistic crisis due to doubts about "the ability of art to perform the lofty truth-telling function he had conceived for it," and finally, "epistemological nihilism—that truth either cannot be known or does not even exist."[72] Similar doubts assail young Pierre upon reading Isabel's letter. This doubt does not shake Pierre's resolve; on the contrary, it redoubles it. Instead of losing faith in his ideal vision, he becomes repulsed by a world that refuses to live up to that vision.

Pierre's Idealism and 'The Absolute'

Pierre is best characterized as an idealist and moral absolutist. An ideology is a system or set of ideals and beliefs, each of which contributes to satisfying one's conception of what is perfect, right, or true. Idealism, then, is full commitment to pursuing or embodying an ideology, especially to an unrealistic degree. As in the

---

[71] Charles N. Watson, Jr., "Melville and the Themes of Timonism: From *Pierre* to *The Confidence-Man*," *On Melville*, edited by Louis J. Budd and Edwin Harrison Cady (Durham: Duke University Press, 1988), 172-187. 172.

[72] Ibid.

previous chapter, the 'absolute' refers to some unchangeable and self-existent feature of reality, although in *Pierre* the 'absolute' in question concerns the existence or non-existence of objective moral truths.

Pierre's ideology draws from numerous cultural, political, and moral tributaries inherent in his upbringing. Facets of his ideology encompass Spenserian views of "all-bewildering beauty" and romantic love, patriotic and familial pride in his "martial race" of "American" forefathers, and grandiose conceptions of what his father called the "meek, but kingly style" of Christian gentlemanliness (*P*, 6). Despite "inherit[ing]" his faith through an "insensible sliding process" rather than adopting it with an "absolute motive," Pierre also comes to possess grandiose conceptions of Christlike martyrdom, which he draws upon when formulating his plan to elope with Isabel (*P*, 7). Though not devout in a traditional sense, Pierre nevertheless insists on holding himself and the world accountable to Jesus Christ's teachings on charity and goodwill from the 'Sermon on the Mount,' described as an "inexhaustible soul-melting stream of loving-kindness" which embodies "all the love of the past, and… any conceivable future" (*P*, 207). When Pierre sees that his world fails to live up to such ideals, he decides to emulate Jesus Christ's example of self-sacrifice with his own grand martyrdom fantasy.

Pierre's religious beliefs originate in the culture of upper-class Protestant Christianity in his rural Saddle Meadows community, and he justifies (or rationalizes) many of his actions according to his religious feelings. Melville's biographers find Pierre's background to be an obvious retelling of the author's own upbringing, including his family's religious arrangement. Melville's father Allan casually practiced a form of mild Unitarianism, which according to his mother Maria, a devout follower of Calvinism

via the Dutch Reformed Church, tended to "diminish the majesty of God in favor of the dignity of man"—a criticism later levied against secular humanism.[73] It is Maria's Calvinism conflated with upper-class Episcopalianism that dominates the religious culture of Saddle Meadows, and it is the casual Unitarianism of his father that manifests as the Church of the Apostles.

Despite the dissimilarities between these two sects, each sect presents Pierre with the same fatal hypocrisy; that is, they both operate in the name of Christianity and yet fail to live up to Jesus Christ's message of charity and mercy. Pierre's perception of hypocrisy in these institutions may be accurate, but his downfall demonstrates that there are countless ways in which the opposite approach, the pursuit of perfect virtue, can also lead one astray. Pierre discovers that absolutism, even for such seemingly innocuous principles as charity and mercy, may lead to destruction.

One potentially harmful consequence of pursuing such perfection, for example, is despair—the dark side of idealism. Once idealists begin to will all of humanity to embrace and live according their own ideals, they will invariably be disappointed. Such disappointment is a breeding ground for despair, depression, and even hatred or resentment of humanity—an undermining attitude for anyone whose ideals are based on universal love. Moreover, absolutists who fail to live up to their own ideals face even greater psychological repercussions, such as guilt, self-loathing, or even self-harm.

Recognizing this, the differences between the idealism of Ishmael and Pierre become apparent. Whereas Ishmael's idealism dictates his *own* interaction with the world, motivating him to act according to his humanist principles, Pierre holds *everyone*

---

[73] Delbanco, *Melville: His World and Work*, 21-22.

else accountable to his ideals, leaving him continually revolted by human societies that fail to live up to such expectations; this universal judgment is evident in Pierre's exclamation to Reverend Falsgrave, "Everything is the matter; the whole world is the matter" (*P*, 162). While Ishmael's 'awakening' causes him to choose Christlike love for humanity at the expense of prior moral commitments (particularly the biblical commandment prohibiting idolatry), Pierre's 'awakening' accomplishes nearly the opposite, as he cements himself in moral absolutism regardless of the consequences to his mother, his fiancé, and others.

Of course, it could be argued that Pierre too chooses love for humanity over certain doctrinal commitments (such as 'honor thy mother') by taking Isabel and Delly under his care against his mother's wishes, thus emulating a Christlike example of charity for his orphaned sister and of mercy for the 'fallen' woman. Any positive readings of Pierre's moral absolutism, however, must account for his problematic motives, particularly his lust for Isabel, as well as his rejection and separation from his community, his abhorrence of humanity, and the heartbreak that he causes by abandoning Lucy. Pierre's apologists must also account for the utter destruction of his life and the lives of those around him, which results from his attempt to live up to an impossible standard of Christlikeness.

Further distinguishing the two young idealists, Pierre lacks Ishmael's capability of dealing with ambiguity. He rejects all notions of subjectivity and relativism and refutes the ambiguities that pervade not only his circumstances, but also his own motives and beliefs; for example, his commitment to 'know nothing but the truth' is undercut by his 'unconscious' admission that "sometimes a lie is heavenly, and truth infernal," although

he attempts to distance himself from this thought (*P*, 92). This "incapacity for ambiguity," as Priscilla Wald calls it, manifests in Pierre's approach to nearly everything he thinks and does.[74] For example, Wald argues that this 'incapacity' explains Pierre's choice to "legitimize Isabel with a fictitious marriage" and thereby to continue operating within the cultural modes of familial legacy already in place in Saddle Meadows despite losing faith in precisely those institutions and in the concept of legitimacy itself.[75]

Interestingly, Pierre possesses both qualities that Ishmael prescribes for a well-balanced perspective: "doubts of all things earthly and intuitions of some things heavenly" (*MD*, 409). Pierre's 'doubts of all things earthly' manifest in his aforementioned skepticism regarding ordinary objects (much like Ahab's perception of all things as 'paperboard masks'), whereas his "sublime intuitiveness," despite being "ever obscured by the dense fogs of earth," still impresses upon him the "sun-like glories of god-like truth and virtue" (*P*, 111). Rather than making him a man who "regards them both with an equal eye" (*MD*, 409), however, these qualities cause Pierre to completely abandon 'all things earthly' in favor of reaching exclusively for the divine. Ishmael also cautions, "There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness," paraphrasing King Solomon's advice not to wander "out of the way of understanding" (*MD*, 465). The narrator in *Pierre* offers a similar warning about truth: "it is not for man to follow the trail of truth too far, since by so doing he entirely loses the directing compass of his mind" (*P*, 165). But Pierre disregards such notions, committing himself to follow 'sad truth,' even to his own destruction.

---

[74] Priscilla Wald, "Hearing Narrative Voices in Melville's *Pierre*," *Boundary* 2 (Spring 1990): 100-132.

[75] Ibid.

Pierre is not oblivious to the potential liability of this Promethean quality in himself, which more nearly resembles a trait of Ahab than of Ishmael. For example, when swearing by heaven to testify to Lucy's brightness and beauty, Pierre admits that his love is "profane, since it mortally reaches toward the heaven in ye" (*P*, 4). This 'profane' quality of reaching for heaven in all things is Pierre's tragic flaw; it dictates the course of his downfall, as, disillusioned with the "delicate warmths" of his former worldview, he instead "*madly* demand[s] more ardent fires" (*P*, 6; emphasis added). Just as Ahab insists upon "treating with all Powers upon an equal basis," as Melville writes, Pierre too decides that he "shall declare [himself] an equal power" with both God and humankind in the event that both refuse to vindicate his actions (*P*, 107).[76] In his declaration that he will 'know what *is*' and will act solely according to "what [his] deepest angel dictates," Pierre commits to pursue truth and virtue above all, even if they supersede the will of 'Heaven' (*P*, 65). This moral absolutism, like Ahab's metaphysical absolutism, is a form of madness. Pierre's 'white whale' is his idea of virtue; like Ahab, he pursues it even to the point of blasphemy.

Pierre vs. Moral Relativism

Relativism is the position that morality and truth are not absolute; being neither objective nor universally applicable, they exist only in relation to certain contexts, usually defined culturally, historically, or even individually. Melville struggles with relativist implications in all aspects of his philosophy, not only in moral questions. For example, regarding *epistemology*, the study of the nature of knowledge and theories of justification for belief, Ishmael advocates for skeptical indifference. Ishmael compares John Locke

---

[76] Melville, "To Nathaniel Hawthorne," 186.

and Immanuel Kant, representatives of two major opposing schools of epistemological thought—empiricism and "Platonic idealism," respectively—and dismisses both.[77] Instead of "trimming boat" or flip-flopping between empiricism and idealism, Ishmael urges, "throw all these thunder-heads overboard, and then you will float light and right" (*MD*, 357).

After Ishmael rejects these epistemological theories, his shipmates demonstrate the subjective nature of human experience by forming varying interpretations of the symbols on an Ecuadorian doubloon: Ahab sees his own "mysterious self," Starbuck perceives the Christian trinity, Stubb identifies optimism in the "jolly sun," and Flask calculates the coin's monetary value in cigars (*MD*, 470-475). Then Pip, seemingly practicing his grammar, repeats, "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look" (*MD*, 475). Pip's recitation, though seemingly nonsense, actually identifies the purpose of the passage by drawing attention to the subjective act of 'looking.' Regardless of whether or not the symbols have intrinsic meaning, the observers can only perceive the symbols— and reality—through their own individual prejudices and motivations.

In *Pierre*, Melville confronts his protagonist with messages of moral relativism at every turn. Both religious and secular authorities alike—personified by Reverend Falsgrave and the philosopher Plotinus Plinlimmon, respectively—attempt to persuade Pierre of what Ishmael calls a "sage and sensible conclusion that a man's religion is one thing, and this practical world quite another" (*MD*, 83). For Pierre, however, the possible truth of this 'sage and sensible conclusion' is devastating, and his self-destruction

---

[77] Immanuel Kant was an idealist insofar as he believed that some *a priori* knowledge could have transcendental origins, but his views differed from traditional Platonic idealism. Melville may have been unfamiliar with Kant's exact position, but likely associated Kant with Platonic Idealism based on cultural perception of the major branches of philosophy. See Nancy Fredricks, *Melville's Art of Democracy* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 17.

coincides with his acquisition of what Herschel Parker calls "tragic knowledge… that Christianity as Jesus taught it [is], however alluring, also impracticable."[78] Moreover, Falsgrave and Plinlimmon together account for both sides of the rural-urban dichotomy, leaving no place for Pierre's moral absolutism.

Pierre first encounters moral relativism at breakfast with his mother, Mrs. Glendenning, and Saddle Meadows' religious authority Reverend Falsgrave. In a discussion regarding Delly being disowned by her family because of her adultery, Pierre and Mrs. Glendenning oppose one another, with the former advocating for mercy and the latter demanding condemnation. Taking the opportunity to seek moral advice without disclosing knowledge of his late father's affair or of Isabel, Pierre asks Falsgrave whether or not a son ought to continue honoring his father even if the man was a "seducer," and whether or not one should look upon an illegitimate half-sibling with familial love (*P*, 101-102). Falsgrave, who finds it a "social disadvantage" that clergy are expected to have greater moral insights than their congregation, presents to Pierre the problem of ambiguity that undermines moral absolutism: "Millions of circumstances modify all moral questions, so that though conscience may possibly dictate freely in any known special case; yet, by one universal maxim, to embrace all moral contingencies,—this is not only impossible, but the attempt, to me, seems foolish" (*P*, 102). Here Falsgrave advocates for a moral system based on exercising one's conscience on a case-by-case basis—*situational relativism* or *situation ethics*, formally—which entails a denial of the existence of universal principles that are applicable in every circumstance. Unlike cultural or historical relativism, which hold that morality is merely a human construct that

---

[78] Parker, *Herman Melville, Vol. II*, 69.

varies according to place or time, situational relativism does permit the possibility of objectively right actions, but holds this rightness to be relative to the situation.

Neither of Falsgrave's interlocutors finds his neutrality to be satisfactory. Pierre petitions for mercy on behalf of Delly, referencing Jesus Christ's defense of the adulteress in the Gospel of John (*P*, 101).[79] Mrs. Glendenning, a fundamentalist Calvinist, forces the Reverend to recall a different Bible passage regarding a parent's sin being "visited upon the children to the third generation" (*P*, 100). By this doctrine she condemns both Delly and her infant child, finding them equally deserving of eviction; moreover, she calls it a "blemish" in Falsgrave's character that "the benevolence of his heart, too much warps in him the holy rigor of our Church's doctrines (*P*, 101). Nevertheless, Falsgrave maintains that such questions in morals are "absolutely incapable of a definite answer, which shall be universally applicable" (*P*, 103).

In a remarkably Hawthornian episode, each of Falsgrave's endorsements for relativism are punctuated by his "surplice-like napkin" dropping from his collar, revealing a brooch carved with the symbol of the union of serpent and dove (*P*, 102-103)—a common symbol, here alluding to Jesus Christ's charge to his apostles to be "wise as serpents, and harmless as doves."[80] Falsgrave, a "shrewd, benevolent-minded man" and thus the embodiment of this balance between serpent and dove, refrains from sharing his own opinion in order to avoid inciting dissent with esteemed community members (*P*, 102). Because of this, Brian Higgins notes, Falsgrave directly opposes the sermon of Father Mapple, which indicts anyone charmed away from 'Gospel Duty' and

---

[79] John 8:3-11 (*King James Bible*).

[80] Matt. 10:16 (*King James Bible*)

warns against trying to 'please rather than to appall.'[81] The dropping of the Reverend's 'surplice-like' napkin, then, further symbolizes a failure of his duty as a 'man of the cloth' to speak the Gospel truth indiscriminately.

Pierre initially expresses agreement with Falsgrave's relativist assertions, but later recants after learning that the Reverend has failed to oppose Delly's eviction from the neighborhood. Pierre rebukes Falsgrave, announcing, "A hint from heaven assures me now, that thou hast no earnest and world-disdaining counsel for me. I must seek it direct from God himself" (*P*, 164). Pierre not only rejects Falsgrave's moral authority, but also learns to distrust institutionalized Christianity altogether, accusing it of being "unavoidably entangled by all fleshly alliances" and incapable of "[moving] with godly freedom in a world of benefices" (*P*, 164). Despite his own actions being 'unavoidably entangled' by his fleshly desire for Isabel, Pierre's rejection of the church's authority only further justifies to him the rightness of his absolutism.

Pierre's ideology thereafter encompasses a spurning of religious dogma and hypocrisy, an endorsement of the moral responsibility of individuals, and a valuing of human well being; by this combination, Pierre's moral drive, while still directly inspired by the example and teachings of Jesus Christ, manifests in secular humanist form. Laura López Peña identifies this same manifestation in the author: "By rejecting any form of institutionalized religion and dogma, Melville seems to suggest that the fraternal love and forbearance promoted—yet sometimes not practiced—by religious institutions need to

---

[81] Brian Higgins and Herschel Parker, *Reading Melville's Pierre; Or, the Ambiguities* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 75.

emerge from individuals."[82] However, Peña argues, Melville also "moves closer to a secular rather than religious view of morality that is based on the fact of being… and being-*with* others."[83] Based on Peña's interpretation, it seems Melville's moral position involves two key components: first, individuals, not institutions, must be responsible for the moral justification and promotion of the principle of 'fraternal love;' secondly, although this principle must emerge from individuals, it must be practiced interdependently with others in a manner similar to that of Ishmael and Queequeg. While Pierre succeeds in manifesting his own moral drive to humanism, he fails to incorporate *others* into his humanist vision, foolishly attempting to forge human community using only the tools of 'rugged individualism.'

Pierre encounters moral relativism again in a pamphlet he discovers while journeying to the city, this time in the writings of a more secular authority. This pamphlet, written by the philosopher and leader of the 'Apostles' Plotinus Plinlimmon, serves as both a philosophical centerpiece and as the dividing line between the rural and urban sections of the novel. To formulate his argument for relativism, Plinlimmon uses a nautical timekeeping metaphor in which "Chronometricals" refer to the perfect and divine morality accomplishable only in heaven, whereas "Horologicals" refer to the "attainable earthly excellence" that is necessarily adjusted to accommodate practical human experience (*P*, 210-215). According to Plinlimmon, Pierre's most cherished doctrine, the Sermon on the Mount, has been "proved entirely impracticable" in human history (*P*, 215). From this, Plinlimmon draws the following conclusion:

---

[82] Laura López Peña, *Beyond the Walls: Being with Each Other in Herman Melville's Clarel* (Valencia: University of Valencia, 2015), 72.

[83] Ibid. (emphasis in the original).

In things terrestrial (Horological) a man must not be governed by ideas celestial (chronometrical); that certain minor self-renunciations… his own mere instinct… will teach him to make, but he must by no means make a complete unconditional sacrifice of himself in behalf of any other being, or any cause, or any conceit. […] A virtuous expediency, then, seems the highest desirable or attainable earthly excellence for the mass of men, and is the only earthly excellence that their Creator intended for them (*P*, 214).

Plinlimmon's relativism expands upon the situational relativism of Falsgrave by adding a guiding principle: 'virtuous expediency.' This type of situational relativism, called *pragmatism*, is concerned with finding the best possible solution for any given moral dilemma based on which course of action is most practical, is most beneficial, and can reasonably be accomplished; thus, pragmatism is concerned with consequences rather than actions. Moreover, the pamphlet's goal of promoting the "highest desirable or attainable excellence *for the mass of men*" recalls Utilitarian theories, which traditionally hold that in most cases the moral action is whichever promotes the best outcome for the most people (*P*, 214; emphasis added). A Plinlimmonian utopia, therefore, is one in which all people act according to a reasonable balance between their own well being and generosity; if everyone collectively provides a little charity, no individuals will be compelled to be too charitable for their own good. The thesis of 'virtuous expediency,' then, is that one ought to be charitable only in cases when no undue self-sacrifice is required, and that any 'minor self-renunciations' ought to be performed with a proper instinct toward one's own general well being.

There is, however, a less charitable reading of 'virtuous expediency' available, since the pamphlet implies that one ought to be charitable so long as it is *convenient*. Such a reading casts Plinlimmon as an enabler who seeks to moralize self-interest by discouraging charitable acts except for in trivial cases when it costs little or nothing.

Plinlimmon claims that people can put off trying to be Christlike until they go to heaven, for in heaven, "they can freely turn the left cheek, because there the right cheek will never be smitten," and "they can freely give all to the poor [because] there will be no poor to give to" (*P*, 214). The same 'virtuous expediency' will be sufficient in heaven because there will be no cause for anything greater. By this interpretation, the difference between heavenly 'chronometrical' morality and earthly 'horological' morality is found not in the agent but in the environment, thus absolving individuals and society of the moral responsibility to care for the less fortunate. In any case, Plinlimmon's theory condemns Pierre's 'unconditional self-sacrifice' because it goes against his own best interest and is therefore virtuously inexpedient. Plinlimmon and Falsgrave agree that any attempt to live according to a moral 'chronometrical' or absolute is foolish.

Unsurprisingly, *Pierre*'s critics disagree about many aspects of the pamphlet, particularly its role in the novel and the relationship between Melville's own philosophy and that of Plinlimmon. Some treat the pamphlet's message as a straightforward presentation of Melville's own philosophy.[84] Others believe precisely the opposite, interpreting the pamphlet as a satire intended to indict relativist philosophers and institutions.[85] Still others try to link Plinlimmon and his philosophy to specific individuals such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Benedict De Spinoza, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and others in

---

[84] H.W. Schneider called it "the nearest Melville ever came to making a technical, academic formulation of… his philosophy." Such straightforwardness, however, would be quite anomalous in Melville's work, especially in a novel so intentionally ambiguous as *Pierre*. Herbert Wallace Schneider, "At Sea," *A History of American Philosophy (*Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1946), 255-263.

[85] For example, see Tyrus Hillway, "Pierre, the Fool of Virtue," *American Literature* 21, no. 2 (May 1949): 201-211.

an attempt to pinpoint the target of Melville's criticism.[86] Higgins, for example, finds Plinlimmon's refutation of unconditional self-sacrifice to be undoubtedly Baconian, pointing out that Francis Bacon is even referenced by name in the pamphlet.[87]

Based on the 'less charitable' reading of Plinlimmon's pamphlet and on the Hawthornian name of the relativist Reverend Falsgrave, which freely associates the character with both falsity and mortality, Melville clearly treats the philosopher and clergyman and their shared message of moral relativism with satire and suspicion if not with outright detestation. Plinlimmon's deferment of moral responsibility to the afterlife echoes some Unitarian moralists who made similar arguments to account for their suspicion of upward mobility or even to defend the institution of slavery. Such Unitarians portrayed wealth and social status as burdens to be borne stoically, while maintaining that the poor and enslaved were "enviable" in their freedom from such responsibilities.[88] William Ellery Channing, for example, exclaims, "How often have I known professional and mercantile men toiling anxiously through the night, and sacrificing health, whilst the laborer has been wrapped in oblivion of all his cares!"[89]

Howe describes such arguments as a means for Unitarians to explain away problems with their belief, characteristic of Yankees and articulated by Henry Ware, Sr.,

---

[86] Edward G. Lueders, "The Melville-Hawthorne Relationship in *Pierre* and *The Blithedale Romance*," *Western Humanities Review* 4higg (Autumn, 1950): 329-334; Helen A. Hauser, "Spinozan Philosophy in *Pierre*," *American Literature* 49, no. 1 (Mar. 1977): 49-56; Merton M. Sealts, "Melville and Emerson's Rainbow (1980)," *Pursuing Melville, 1940-1980: Chapters and Essays* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 250-277, 271.

[87] Brian Higgins, "Plinlimmon and the Pamphlet Again," *Studies in the Novel* 4, no. 1 (1972): 27-38, 27.

[88] Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience*, 145.

[89] William Ellery Channing, *Memoir of William Ellery Channing with Extracts from his Correspondence and Manuscripts,* vol. 3 (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1874). 123. https://books.google.com/books?id=v1w3AAAAMAAJ, accessed February 24, 2016.

that there exists a "'perceptible connection' between a man's character and condition in life… which was 'part of an established scheme of Providence.'"[90] Instead of promising worldly rewards for virtue, Howe explains, Unitarian moralists managed to maintain their belief in this 'established scheme of providence' by promising "heavenly reward for honest toil."[91] By aligning with Unitarian moralists who claim to be Christians and yet fail Christ's charge to help the poor, Plinlimmon embodies the hypocritical religious humanists whom Melville attacks vehemently and passionately in many of his works. Melville's criticism of moral relativism and its proponents does not, however, equate to a promotion of moral absolutism, which he approaches with a similar degree of suspicion and doubt, as evidenced by his portrayal of Pierre's failure and demise.

The Problem of Motives

The irreconcilable disparity between Pierre's moral principles and his actions exemplifies the 'problem of motives,' which here refers to the adaptability of even the strictest moral principles to 'immoral' intentions; that is, one can act in accordance with a principle, but do so with ulterior 'immoral'[†] motives. In some cases, the only way to satisfy the 'immoral' motive is to operate according to the principle, although the principle may be redefined, equivocated, rationalized, or otherwise bent to accommodate the agent's intention. In other cases, one may appropriate the *appearance* of acting in

---

[90] Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience*, 145.

[91] Ibid.

[†] The concept of 'immorality' is tricky when dealing with moral relativism, because the same difficulty of determining which actions are 'moral' also applies to determining which actions are 'immoral.' Thus, 'immorality' and 'immoral' appear in single quotes to draw attention to this complexity. For the purpose of articulating the problem of motives, any 'immoral' action will here be defined as any action that directly contradicts *the spirit or intention* upon which the subverted principle is founded. For example, if the 'moral' principle is charity, then its 'immoral' opposite is greed.

accordance with the principle for the purpose of gaining trust, evading justice, or otherwise facilitating the performance of the 'immoral' action.

Pierre falls into the first set of cases, in which one can only achieve one's immoral desires by utilizing a moral principle. From the moment he first sees Isabel's face, he is overcome with sexual desire, which only intensifies upon learning that she may be his sister; however, his ideological commitments prohibit him from seeking to fulfill this desire outright. Acting on this desire alone would put Pierre into a state of *cognitive dissonance*, which refers to the mental anxiety that results from holding conflicting beliefs or desires simultaneously; specifically, Pierre's incestuous lust for Isabel is irreconcilable with his deeply valued Spenserian views of chivalry, his Protestant views of purity, his commitment to Lucy Tartan, and his sense of self, which is largely composed of these ideas. In order to avoid cognitive dissonance and preserve his sense of self and yet still satisfy his sexual desire, Pierre must operate *within* the framework of his moral principles in order to consciously or unconsciously justify his actions to himself.

Pierre rationalizes his decision to enter into a fake marriage with Isabel by appealing to his principle of Christian charity; however, he is clearly moved more by a mixture of sexual desire and grand delusions of self-martyrdom than by genuine charity. He suspects that he may merely be an "infatuate" for Isabel, yet overcomes this suspicion by reassuring himself that "all heaven [will] justify in him" in spite of it because his plan involves making him into a "grand self-renouncing victim" (*P* 171-173). In this way, Pierre mentally pre-atones for his incest and adultery with what he believes will be a suitable sacrifice, thereby avoiding cognitive dissonance. Furthermore, by pretending to marry Isabel, Pierre attempts to preserve the part of his identity and reputation that is

seated on aristocratic notions of familial legitimacy. He knows that his mother will disown him and that Lucy will feel betrayed; nevertheless, Pierre still fabricates a marriage with Isabel to stave off accusations of adultery, thereby satisfying his need to be perceived as one who operates within Biblical law.

There is enough evidence to suggest that Pierre consummates this potentially incestuous relationship, although Melville is ambiguous on this matter. Notably, many critics have elaborated on the seemingly incestuous relationship between Pierre and each of his family members, from his worship of his father, to his flirtatious relationship with his mother (whom he calls "sister"), to his boyhood romance with his cousin Glen.[92] By reworking his moral principles of charity and chastity to suit his sexual and incestuous desires, Pierre manages to circumvent his own internal psychological obstacles that would prevent him acting on such motives. By such means it becomes possible for Pierre, an idealist reformer and moral absolutist, to commit deception, adultery, incest, murder, and suicide, all in the name of Christlike charity and self-sacrifice.

Thus, Melville challenges utilitarianism's consequence-based theory of morality by identifying motives as a crucial component to moral judgment. Furthermore, through his psychological examination of Pierre, Melville also raises serious questions about moral objectivity: If humans are capable of such self-deception and of manipulation of moral principles, is it even possible for humans to be certain about whether or not their actions are morally right? How can one identify objectively right principles when one's judgment is invariably warped by subjective experience?

---

[92] For example, Nixon, "Compromising Politics and Herman Melville's *Pierre*," 730.

Melville revisits this problem of motives in *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857), the last major novel published in his lifetime. In this experimental novel, a confidence man (or multiple confidence men, as some readers have suggested) boards the Mississippi River steamboat *Fidèle*, which translates to 'faith,' to preach a message of confidence or faith in humankind; however, he subverts his own message by using such pleas to swindle other passengers out of money.[93] Tellingly, the confidence man is the sole voice promoting charity, goodwill, and above all, faith in humankind, as the other passengers antagonize this message with their own words of bitterness, distrust, and even hatred for their fellow human beings. Through his message of 'confidence' in humanity, he manages to convert (albeit only temporarily in some cases) some of his fellow passengers; in fact, he refuses to take money from his victims until they have expressed complete confidence or faith in him and therefore in human goodness. For the converted, however, one imagines that they will soon discover they have been swindled, and will return to their former distrust for humanity with even greater resolve.

The confidence man, then, exemplifies the second set of aforementioned cases, in which one knowingly appropriates the appearance of morality in order to trick, coerce, manipulate, and evade justice. In many ways, *The Confidence-Man* reexamines the central problems of *Pierre* on a larger scale, amplifying Pierre's individual moral conundrum (that moral ideals are often impracticable and subject to corruption) into the struggles of a politically divided nation. Written at a time in which the United States was fracturing and published only four years before the nation descended into civil war, *The Confidence-Man* satirizes an era of insurmountable anxiety, distrust, and irreparable

---

[93] Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 7. Subsequent references will be to this edition by page number and the abbreviation *CM*.

division. Tellingly, the passengers aboard the *Fidèle*, like the nation they represent, express their distrust and disdain for humanity while debating the ethics of slavery, expansionism, capitalism, and the genocide of Native Americans, all while affirming egalitarian ideology and wielding Christian moral rhetoric.

Many critics have examined the political dimension to *The Confidence-Man*. Zack Friedman, for example, finds the confliction between the confidence man's message and motive to be symbolic of capitalism, which has "a peculiar, contradictory relationship to trust" because it necessitates that all parties act acting according to self-interest, and yet it cannot operate without the level of trust necessary to conduct transactions, invest in Wall Street, offer credit and loans, trade stocks, sign contracts, and even use currency.[94] Helen Trimpi notes several allusions to political events such the founding of the Republican Party in the mid-1850s and the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, which threatened to permit the Western Territories to become slave states.[95] In any case, Melville's critique exposes the 'problem of motives' operating on a national scale, as the fracturing nation claimed the moral imperative of 'manifest destiny' in order to appropriate a continent and displace Native Americans, claimed the right of all persons to freedom while profiting from human slavery, and claimed the ideal of the 'American Dream' of material wealth and social mobility to exploit laborers and instill an imperative for consumerism.

But political figures are not the only target of Melville's satire, and the confidence man is not the only character who subverts his moral message. Melville also attacks religious institutions that preach charity and faith and yet subvert this message by

---

[94] Zack Friedman, "Prose and Cons: On Melville's *The Confidence Man*," *Hypocrite Reader* 17 (June 2012), accessed December 2, 2015, http://hypocritereader.com/17/prose-and-cons.

[95] Helen P. Trimpi, *Melville's Confidence Men and American Politics in the 1850s* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1987), 78.

remaining complacent toward or even approving of human atrocities. Early in the novel, an Episcopalian minister and a Methodist minister approach the confidence man, who is disguised as a disabled black beggar (a common icon of slavery in antebellum political cartoons), and both try to determine whether or not he is trustworthy (*CM*, 19-24). The Episcopalian minister demands to know if there is anyone on board who can vouch for the beggar, and then searches the boat for the persons listed—seeking evidence of his earnestness rather than reflexively offering charity or faith. The Methodist minister, on the other hand, suggests putting "as charitable construction as one can upon the poor fellow" and declares that people should "pray against… mistrusting his fellow man;" however, he too becomes suspicious and quickly turns away without offering charity, thus advocating for faith in humanity in words, but not in deeds (*CM*, 22). Melville here examines two denominations comprising the ends of the spectrum of the "American" religious caste system—the Episcopalians, long associated with elitism and wealth, and the Methodists, a denomination of the working class associated with concern for the poor—and unites them in their underlying flaws of hypocrisy, lack of charity, and lack of faith in their fellow human beings.[96]

Melville also identifies this problem of motives in the rhetoric and ideology of the influential transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau, who appear in the novel as esoteric

---

[96] For more information on the denominational stereotypes and other socioeconomic aspects of U.S. religion hinted at in this passage, see the following: Christian Smith and Robert Faris, "Socioeconomic Inequality in the American Religious System: An Update and Assessment," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44, no. 1 (2005): 95-104; E. Digby Baltzell, *The Protestant Establishment: Aristocracy & Caste in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Poor and the People Called Methodists* (Abingdon: Abingdon Press, 2002); B. Drummond Ayres Jr., "The Episcopalians: An American Elite with Roots Going Back to Jamestown," *The New York Times*, April 28, 1981, accessed February 1, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/1981/04/28/us/the-episcopalians-an-american-elite-with-roots-going-back-to-jamestown.html?pagewanted=all.

caricatures named Mark Winsome and Egbert.[97] Stephen Matterson explains that Melville satirized the transcendentalists on the grounds that "their spirituality masks an inherent materialism, and even a lack of charity."[98] The underlying implication of the Emersonian doctrine of the 'self-reliant man,' the idea that people must be fully responsible for their own well being in order to reach their full potential and to achieve 'transcendence,' is that being charitable to people actually does them a great disservice because it inhibits their self-reliance and stunts their spiritual growth.

Scholars continue to speculate on the identity of Melville's characters from *The Confidence-Man*, identifying a wide range of public figures: Harrison Hayford sees Edgar Allen Poe in the "crazy beggar… peddling a rhapsodical tract" (*CM*, 230); Trimpi sees William Cullen Bryant, Theodore Parker, and Horace Greeley in the Man with the Weed, the Man in Gray, and the PIO Man, respectively; Egbert Oliver even identifies the now-obscure actress and writer Fanny Kemble in the severely negative portrayal of Goneril.[99] Whether or not these identifications are true to Melville's intentions is subject to continuing debate; however, such analyses establish that, from transcendentalism to religion to politics in the U.S., Melville saw hypocrisy and greed everywhere he looked.

---

[97] Credit for identifying Emerson and Thoreau goes to Egbert S. Oliver, "Melville's Picture of Emerson and Thoreau in *The Confidence-Man*," *College English* 8 (Nov., 1946): 61-72. For an in-depth analysis of this connection, see also Herschel Parker, "Melville's Satire of Emerson and Thoreau: An Evaluation of the Evidence," *American Transcendental Quarterly*, 7 (Summer 1970): 61-67.

[98] Stephen Matterson, introduction to *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, vii-xxxvi (New York: Penguin, 1990), xxvii.

[99] Harrison Hayford, "Poe in the Confidence-Man," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 14, no. 3 (Dec., 1959): 207-218; Helen P. Trimpi, "Three of Melville's Confidence Men: William Cullen Bryant, Theodore Parker, and Horace Greeley," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 21, no. 3 (Fall 1979): 368-395; Egbert S. Oliver, "Melville's Goneril and Fanny Kemble," *The New England Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (Dec., 1945): 489-500.

In a further challenge to humanist idealism, the confidence man and other passengers turn from the problem of motives to more practical concerns. Together they show that humanist faith, while understandable in abstract conceptions of humanity, is a liability and potentially a mortal error when applied to the practical world. Secular humanism is in this way susceptible to a reformulation of Ishmael's 'sage and sensible conclusion' regarding religion, in which humanist ideals are one thing and the practical world another. In a crucial episode, one passenger tells of Colonel John Moredock, a frontiersman whom he describes as both a "good fellow at the bottom" and an "Indian-hater" who was as "benevolent" to his (white) neighbor as he was "retributive in secret" against "Indians" (*CM*, 168-170). Despite this hatred, he nevertheless became "admired and loved" by his community (*CM*, 186). The confidence man is bewildered: "If the man of hate, how could John Moredock also be the man of love?" (*CM*, 187).

Anticipating this question, the passenger takes pains to establish that "backwoodsmen" and "Indians" have good reason to distrust each other on account of a history of violence, deceit, and broken treaties, and that such animosity has turned into hereditary racism between the groups (*CM*, 168-170). He also provides a psychological excuse for Moredock's violent racism, explaining that "Indians" massacred his entire family and only then did he make genocidal vengeance his life's passion (*CM*, 173-186). Having brought to light only one aspect of the ceaselessly violent history of humankind, the passenger concludes, "It is terrible that one creature should so regard another [and] should make it conscience to abhor an entire race… but is it surprising?" (*CM*, 175).

Reformulated, this question directly challenges the stated goals of secular humanism: How can one expect to unite humanity into a global community when all

aspects of human society and the entirety of human history prove this goal to be impossible? In speech, the confidence man is remarkably earnest, but like twentieth-century secular humanists, he proclaims a fallacious view of humanity that is too abstracted from reality. Friedman calls this "the point of slippage between trust and distrust," and says the confidence man occupies this point because he "relies on an image of humanity in the abstract that is to be trusted, and from this he derives his own trustworthiness."[100] Melville certainly possesses humanist inclinations, but he is not naïve enough to confuse his abstract and idealized vision of humanity with his perceptions of individuals and societies. His exploration of the problem of motives and the problem of practicability demonstrate his doubts about the philosophical justifications for such beliefs. Furthermore, *Pierre* and *The Confidence-Man* together expose his struggle with questions about the seemingly incomprehensible nature of morality itself—concerns that he despairingly finds unanswerable.

The Dark Side of Idealism

Melville's anxieties about morality are especially relevant in the context of secular humanism, which holds no claim to objective morality as intuitively authoritative as 'divine command' theory, yet wills its ideals to be treated as universal maxims.[101] Melville certainly seems to desire an objective foundation for morality, but as his examination of the 'problem of motives' shows, he recognizes that even universal maxims are corruptible when entrusted to human beings and can easily be appropriated to

---

[100] Friedman, "Prose and Cons."

[101] Contrary to common assumptions, forfeiting the appeal to 'divine command' as the foundation for morality does not require subscribing to relativism; in fact, most ethical theories in Western moral philosophy are perfectly compatible with naturalism, from Aristotelian virtue ethics to utilitarianism. Subscribing to secular humanism does not require subscribing to moral relativism.

mask subversive intentions. Melville's moral concerns mirror his religious struggles, about which Hawthorne came to his famous conclusion, "He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other."[102] This same trait manifests in Melville's moral conscience as a struggle between what he wills himself to believe and yet cannot keep from doubting.

Melville may not succeed in finding a philosophically rigorous justification for his moral beliefs; nevertheless, he finds sufficient grounds to criticize the positions of others, as evidenced by his attacks on Unitarianism. In many ways, *Pierre* is an extended critique of Unitarianism, which is highly applicable to secular humanism. Herschel Parker summarizes *Pierre* as the story of a young idealist who learns that "what passed for Christianity in midcentury America, especially among socially prominent and wealthy Unitarians, was very far from Christlike."[103] John Seelye turns the spotlight on the protagonist himself, calling Pierre a "Unitarian clown" because his attempts to put into practice the "Christian necessity of charitable acts," a major Unitarian ideal, only succeed in causing absurdly disproportionate misery and even death for himself and others.[104] Indeed, Pierre's self-martyrdom is exaggerated, the consequences are overblown, and his death is melodramatic, especially considering his demise is sparked by something as seemingly benign as an ideal of Christian charity.

---

[102] From an entry in Nathaniel Hawthorne's notebook, dated November 20, 1856. Transcribed with biographical annotations in Laurie Robertson-Lorant, "Mr. Omoo and the Hawthornes: The Biographical Background," *Hawthorne and Melville: Writing a Relationship*, edited by Jana L. Argersinger and Leland S. Person (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 46.

[103] Parker, *Herman Melville Vol. II*, 69.

[104] John Seelye, "*Pierre*, *Kavanagh*, and the Unitarian Perplex," *Melville's Evermoving Dawn: Centennial Essays*, edited by John Bryant and Robert Milder (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1997): 375-392, 385.

The Church of the Apostles embodies Melville's criticism of institutionalized humanism. The Apostles are very much like a Unitarian project in that they are a collection of impractical intellectuals described by Parker as "a range of crackpot reformers, all idealistic, all ill equipped to live in the real world," all joined together under one church roof to espouse a relativist doctrine.[105] Melville houses them in a repurposed old church, complete with irreverent restorations, such as a courtyard that had "usurped an unoccupied space formerly sacred as the old church's burial enclosure" and a new edifice that looms over the church at the same height of the Church's "sacred tower" (*P*, 266)—recalling the hubris of humans who built the Tower of Babel in an attempt to reach heaven.[106] By housing the Apostles in this irreverent structure, Melville depicts Unitarianism as a theologically empty organization inhabiting the shell of Christianity, remarking, "When the substance is gone, men cling to the shadow" (*P*, 268).

For the Unitarians, the 'substance' of biblical certainty and the dogma of the trinity had been lost, but still they clung to 'shadows' of the bible as a vague source of inspiration and to Christ as a positive human role model. Other sects made this criticism against Unitarians for a number of their controversial theological positions: Unitarians denied the existence of the Trinity in favor of the 'oneness of God,' which for many entailed denying the divinity of Jesus Christ; they rejected the bible as the inspired word of God, finding it to be the product of human minds; they favored natural explanations over supernatural ones, even in regards to the origin of the universe; and they stressed the importance of reason and good works more than faith or baptism. Secular humanists

---

[105] Herschel Parker, *Herman Melville Vol. 2*, 67.

[106] Gen 11:1-9 (*King James Bible*)

likewise jettisoned theological foundations for morality and truth, but still they clung to the shadows of religious rhetoric and to the cultural framework of Christianity.

Pierre too clings to shadows without substance. He is an idealist reformer of sorts, but after isolating himself in his room and turning his search for absolute truth into a project of self-discovery, he only succeeds in exposing his own emptiness. In perhaps the most scrutinized and celebrated passage in *Pierre*, the protagonist, having decided that the world is comprised of nothing but lies, finally turns his disappointed lens of idealism away from others to examine himself. Yet this excavation of the self leads him to a crushing conclusion about the human condition, encased in an archaeological metaphor:

> The old mummy lies buried in cloth on cloth, it takes time to unwrap this Egyptian king. […] By vast pains we mine into the pyramid, by horrible gropings we come to the central room, with joy we espy the sarcophagus; but we lift the lid—and no body is there!—appallingly vacant as vast is the soul of man! (*P*, 285)

In this passage, Pierre articulates his final disillusionment. Often interpreted in the context of Melville's nihilism or, per John Carlos Rowe, as an "existential affirmation of the groundlessness of being," the passage marks Pierre's descent into the aforementioned 'dark side of idealism'—despair.[107] Pierre succumbs to the 'woe that is madness,' thereafter declaring himself "the fool of Truth, the fool of Virtue, [and] the fool of Fate" (*P*, 358). As Ahab strikes at the white whale, believing it to be the sole obstacle between him and metaphysical truth, so Pierre lashes out at his cousin Glen, his first love and fiercest betrayer, finding him to be the embodiment of his disappointment with humanity. By murdering Glen, Pierre performs a final test of his moral agency, perpetrating an unquestionably un-Christlike act with an unambiguous broadcast of his wrathful motive:

---

[107] John Carlos Rowe, *At Emerson's Tomb: The Politics of Classic American Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 89.

"'Tis speechless sweet to murder thee!" (*P*, 359). Thus, this act of violence is also Pierre's last desperate act of truth.

But Pierre's realization about the 'vacancy' of the human soul is not necessarily an outright declaration of nihilism or even soullessness on Melville's part. Rowe, for one, argues that Pierre's discovery does not indict humanity, but rather indicts transcendental idealism and its "absolutely elusive notion of the spirit or soul," as well as the practice common among mystifying politicians and religious leaders to "mask illegitimate power" in the form of "supernatural authority."[108] Indeed, in the passages preceding, Melville leaves open the possibility for substance to be found in the *aggregate* of human souls, just as there is hope for truth, however vague, in the aggregate of human thought: "no one great book must ever be separately regarded… [but] all existing works must be federated… and so regarded as miscellaneous and pantheistic whole" (*P*, 284). This 'pantheistic whole,' Melville finds, is still minute compared to "the latent infiniteness and inexhaustibility" within ourselves, and that "all great books in the world" are but shadows of "invisible and eternally unembodied images in the soul" (*P*, 284).

Thus, even in Pierre's final disillusionment, Melville makes no positive claim that truth does not exist, nor that morality is not objective. Melville implies that truth, while vague and perhaps impossible to articulate, *does* exist and is present in the human soul, and that recognition of truth is possible only in the 'pantheistic' conglomeration of human seeking—a single spark of humanist idealism that withstands his oceanic doubt.

---

[108] Ibid.

Conclusion

Critics often accuse Melville of raising questions without providing any answers.[109] In some cases, such as his metaphysical questions about the nature of God, this accusation rings true; nevertheless, Melville's *moral* beliefs are not inscrutable. Melville never systematizes or proposes his own moral beliefs in any theoretically rigorous form in *Moby Dick*, *Pierre*, or *The Confidence-Man*, but his work demonstrates enough consistencies to articulate his position as well as his doubts. One can certainly identify numerous principles or virtues that Melville values, such as charity, community, toleration of religious and cultural difference, a degree of skepticism and critical thinking, balance and perspective, sincerity (as opposed to hypocrisy), and so on; however, he becomes increasingly pessimistic from one novel to the next about whether or not such virtues are even attainable or practicable.

Melville also identifies what he believes to be flawed approaches to moral questions. He exposes 'virtuous expedience' as a morally compromised and dissatisfying position in *Pierre*, and yet depicts the alternative, an idealist drive for 'the absolute,' to be unattainable and often irredeemably destructive. He shows that such absolutism, whether metaphysical or moral, is a guarantor of madness and self-destruction, exemplified by Ahab and Pierre, respectively. Melville, then, is reluctantly agnostic about the existence of objective or absolute moral truths that are also practicable in human life; nevertheless,

---

[109] For example, Tyrus Hillway, "Pierre, the Fool of Virtue," 201.

he *desires* for this objective morality to be the case, no matter how irreconcilable this desire is with his doubts or relativist inclinations.

How then might Melville answer the classical moral question of how we ought to live? Considering the range of characters presented in these three major novels of the 1850s, Ishmael—though not entirely unproblematic—emerges as the best candidate for Melville's answer. He is a person of faith, but is neither dogmatic nor hypocritical. He acts according to his moral principles, but permits himself to reassess those principles when they conflict with one another, guiding his decisions in such cases by exercising moral reasoning and acting according to whatever best reflects his empathy for others. He does not impose his moral expectations on the world, and instead remains relatively neutral and tolerant concerning the actions and beliefs of others. Furthermore, his morality is paired with adaptability, evidenced by his ability to cope with an existence in which some things are strictly unknowable, yet in which humans possess an innate desire to find the ultimate answers.

Metaphysically, Ishmael is a compatibilist who theorizes that free will operates on a narrow strand between necessity and chance. Epistemologically, he is skeptical of humankind's ability to know the nature of truth, dismissing both empiricism and Platonic idealism and recognizing the inescapable subjectivity of human experience, but he is not so skeptical as to dismiss the possibility of truth entirely. In practice, he acts faithfully according to his own humanist principles and promotes human unity, but he holds no expectation that the rest of the world will follow suit. He opposes the religious and cultural homogenization project of evangelical missionaries, advocating instead for tolerance of other beliefs and ways of life. He questions the Emersonian doctrine of self-

reliance and welcomes interdependence with Queequeg, recognizing that everyone is already interconnected in unseen ways. Finally, he respects that each of these categories are subject to a countless range of ambiguities, thus acknowledging the limits of human understanding and possibility.

This list of traits is remarkably similar to the core principles laid out in the *Humanist Manifestos*, such that it almost reads like a rough first draft. Before claiming Melville's work unequivocally on behalf of secular humanism, however, one must admit to complications. Certainly this set of beliefs and ideals largely anticipates the course of secular humanism in the first half of the twentieth century, but Melville retains a certain degree of suspicion regarding a number of claims adopted by his successors and would likely object to the manner in which they institutionalized their beliefs.

First, while Melville continually expresses doubt in his work about the nature of God and about the ability of human beings to gain certain knowledge of the divine, he nevertheless operates on the positive assumption that God does indeed exist. This position clashes with later secular humanists who self-consciously severed all religious ties and began equating secularism with *metaphysical naturalism*—the belief that there are natural explanations for everything, and that supernatural things like gods and souls do not exist. However, Melville's position is still compatible with the self-styled 'religious humanists' who drafted the first *Humanist Manifesto*, seeking to free human morality from supernatural origins without dismissing divine possibilities altogether.

Secondly, Melville clashes with humanists who express full faith in the infinite potential of humankind and the possibility for utopian conditions on earth, who typically held a positive stance that humans have free will and are morally responsible for their

actions, and who believed that people are endowed with a moral inclination toward good

regardless of the prevalence of evil in human life. Again, Melville seems to *desire* to

believe such things about humanity, but he maintains that there are limits to human

understanding, that free will is limited, and that the moral inclinations of humans tend

toward corruption and enmity. Here, his viewpoint distinguishes him from the writers of

the first *Humanist Manifesto*, but remains compatible with the later versions that account

for the overwhelming problem of evil and the dangers of human progress.

Finally, Melville certainly would have regarded the institutionalization of secular

humanism with suspicion, just as he criticized the operation of Unitarianism in New

England. While secular humanism is often associated with 'Freethought,' cultural *laissez-

faire*, and moral relativism, it is also vulnerable to accusations of being just as dogmatic

and closed-minded as its religious analogues.[110] Peña confirms, "Melville was particularly

critical of religious institutions and representatives who hypocritically promoted

brotherhood and devotion by actually imposing dogma and neutralizing free thinking."[111]

Such charges against Unitarians are also applicable in the case of institutionalized secular

humanism. "If Unitarianism ever fails to be fruitful," Unitarian Charles A. Allen

cautioned in 1908, "the cause is to be found in its becoming… a dogma that has no

---

[110] Many secular humanists object to the association with moral relativism. This association in popular conception stems largely from Francis Schaeffer's influential work, *How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1983). Credited with making 'secular humanism' a pejorative in conservative evangelical discourse, Schaeffer warned that secular humanism was a slippery slope to moral relativism and blamed it for what he called the 'decline' of Western culture—a turning away of conservative values that his readers perceived in the growing acceptance of evolution, the increasing support for gay rights, the proposed Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution, and more. See Randall Herbert Balmer, *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 516.

[111] Peña, *Beyond the Walls*, 69.

spiritual truth."[112] Surely Melville would have taken the early twentieth-century secular humanists' dogmatic approach to be a point deserving of criticism.

So why did Melville remain a member of the Unitarian church for so many years? All Souls' minister emeritus (and Melville scholar) Walter Kring claims that in joining the Unitarian church, Melville "bound himself to no hierarchy, no creed, Christian or otherwise. He simply agreed to search for the truth and to adopt whatever he believed to be the truth for his own use."[113] For Melville, then, the lack of theological substance may have been a necessary concession to make in order to benefit from the Unitarians' message of humanism, rationalist exegesis of scripture, and willingness to depart from religious tradition while still operating in a spiritual framework.

Melville's thought is therefore not typical of secular humanism; however, it is clearly *prototypical* of the secular humanist ideology. The same anxieties, doubts, and disillusionment of Melville reappear in the passions of secular humanists who reacted against religious hypocrisy, against resistance to new scientific knowledge, against defamations of human nature as 'fallen,' and against the cultural conservatism under which social progress seemed stifled or stalled. The same values, beliefs, and ideals that Melville strives to embody and understand in his work also anticipate the course of secular humanism, which organized above all as a means to realize the highest possible forms of human life, to bring individuals and society closer to reaching their full potential, and to transcend cultural barriers to unite humankind into a global community: a 'great and everlasting First Congregation of this whole worshipping world.'

---

[112] Charles A. Allen, "Channing's Liberalism: Dogmatism in Religion," *The Unitarian Register* 87 (September 10, 1908): 990-991. 991.

[113] Quoted in Peña, *Beyond the Walls*, 69.

Bibliography

Allen, Charles A. "Channing's Liberalism: Dogmatism in Religion," *The Unitarian Register* 87 (September 10, 1908): 990-991. 991.

Allen, Joseph Henry. *A History of the Unitarians and the Universalists in the United States*. New York: Christian Literature, 1894. https://ia700402.us.archive.org/8/items/historyofunitari00alle/historyofunitari00alle.pdf, accessed September 20, 2015.

Arvin, Newton. *Herman Melville*. New York: Sloane, 1950.

Ayres Jr., B. Drummond. "The Episcopalians: An American Elite with Roots Going Back to Jamestown." *New York Times*, April 28, 1981. Accessed February 1, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/1981/04/28/us/the-episcopalians-an-american-elite-with-roots-going-back-to-jamestown.html?pagewanted=all.

Balmer, Randall Herbert. *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism*. Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.

Baltzell, E. Digby. *The Protestant Establishment: Aristocracy & Caste in America*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987.

Bastien, Richard. "The Intolerance of Humanism." *Challenge* (February, 1990): 23-24.

Bellows, Henry Whitney. *Re-statements of Christian Doctrine, In Twenty-Five Sermons*. Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1867. Accessed September 25, 2015. https://ia600407.us.archive.org/15/items/restatementschr05bellgoog/restatementschr05bellgoog.pdf

Boudreau, Kristen. *Sympathy in American Literature: American Sentiments from Jefferson to the Jameses*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002.

Browne, Ray B. *Melville's Drive to Humanism*. Lafayette: Purdue, 1971.

Buell, Lawrence. "The Literary Significance of the Unitarian Movement." *American Renaissance*, edited by Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 2004. 241-258.

Channing, William Ellery. *Memoir of William Ellery Channing with Extracts from his Correspondence and Manuscripts,* vol. 3. Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1874. https://books.google.com/books?id=v1w3AAAAMAAJ, accessed February 24, 2016.

———. "Unitarian Christianity." *American Unitarian Conference*. May 5, 1819. Accessed November 1, 2015.

http://www.americanunitarian.org/unitarianchristianity.htm.

Cimino, Richard and Christopher Smith. "Secular Humanism and Atheism beyond
Progressive Secularism." *Sociology Of Religion* 68, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 407-424.

Corbett, Michael, Julia Corbett-Hemeyer, and J. Matthew Wilson. *Politics and Religion
in the United States*. New York: Taylor & Francis, 1999.

Delbanco, Andrew. *Melville: His World and Work*. New York: Vintage, 2005.

Dillingham, William B. *Melville's Later Novels*. Athens: University of Georgia Press,
1986.

Eire, Carlos M.N. *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to
Calvin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Elliott, Emory. "'Wandering To-and-Fro': Melville and Religion." *A Historical Guide to
Herman Melville*, edited by Giles Gunn. New York: Oxford University Press,
2005. 167-204.

Fessenden, Tracy. *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American
Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.

Fredricks, Nancy. *Melville's Art of Democracy*. Athens: University of Georgia Press,
1995.

Friedman, Zack. "Prose and Cons: On Melville's *The Confidence Man*," *Hypocrite
Reader* 17 (June 2012), accessed December 2, 2015, http://hypocritereader.com/
17/prose-and-cons.

Gaylor, Annie Laurie. "Herman Melville." *Freedom From Religion Foundation*, accessed
October 18, 2015, https://ffrf.org/news/day/dayitems/item/14487-herman-
melville.

Hatch, Nathan O. *The Democratization of American Christianity*. New Haven: Yale
University Press, 1989.

Hauser, Helen. A. "Spinozan Philosophy in *Pierre*." *American Literature* 49, no. 1 (Mar.
1977): 49-56.

Hayford, Harrison. "Poe in the Confidence-Man," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 14, no. 3
(Dec., 1959): 207-218.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Blithedale Romance*. New York: Penguin, 1986.

Heitzenrater, Richard P. *The Poor and the People Called Methodists*. Abingdon:

Abingdon Press, 2002.

Herbert, T. Walter, *Moby Dick and Calvinism: A World Dismantled*. Rutgers University
    Press, 1977.

Higgins, Brian. "Plinlimmon and the Pamphlet Again." *Studies in the Novel* 4, no. 1
    (1972): 27-38.

Higgins, Brian and Herschel Parker. *Reading Melville's Pierre; Or, the Ambiguities*.
    Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006).

Hillway, Tyrus. "Pierre, the Fool of Virtue." *American Literature* 21, no. 2 (May 1949):
    201-211.

Howe, Daniel Walker. *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy 1805-
    1861*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1988.

"Humanism." *Pluralism Project*. Accessed October 18, 2015. http://www.pluralism.org/
    religion/humanism/belief.

Kelly, Sean D. "Navigating Past Nihilism." *The New York Times* (New York, NY). Dec.
    5, 2010. http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/12/05/navigating-past-
    nihilism/

Kray, Elizabeth. "Walking Tour: Herman Melville's Downtown New York City."
    Poets.org. Last modified June 27, 2006. https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/
    walking-tour-herman-melvilles-downtown-new-york-city.

Kulkarni, H.B. *Moby-Dick: A Hindu Avatar*. Boulder: Utah State University Press, 1970.

Kurtz, Paul, ed. *Humanist Manifestos I and II*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1973.

LeBeau, Brian F. *Religion in America to 1865*. New York: New York University Press,
    2000.

Lueders, Edward G. "The Melville-Hawthorne Relationship in *Pierre* and *The Blithedale
    Romance*." *Western Humanities Review* 4 (Autumn, 1950): 329-334.

Liquete, Ma Felisa López. "Melville, An Existentialist Humanist." *Revista de Estudios
    Norteamericanos* 1, no. 1 (1991): 49-57.

Martineau, James. *The Rationale of Religious Inquiry* (London: J. Chapman, 1845).
    https://ia902606.us.archive.org/5/items/rationalereligi00whitgoog/
    rationalereligi00whitgoog.pdf, accessed February 26, 2016.

Matterson, Stephen. Introduction to *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, by Herman

Melville, vi-xxxvi. New York: Penguin, 1990.

Matthiessen, F.O. "The Troubled Mind: An American Hamlet." *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968. 467-487.

McWilliams, Susan. "Ahab, American." *The Review of Politics* 74 (2012): 233-260.

Mead, Frank. S. *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*. Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1951.

Melville, Herman. *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*. New York: Penguin, 1990.

———. *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*. New York: Penguin, 2003.

———. *Pierre: or, The Ambiguities*. New York: Penguin, 1996.

———. "To Nathaniel Hawthorne, 16 April, 1851, Pittsfield." *The Writings of Herman Melville: Correspondence*, edited by Lynn Horth. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993. 184-187.

———. "To Sophia Peabody Hawthorne, 8 January 1852, New York." *The Writings of Herman Melville: Correspondence*, edited by Lynn Horth. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993. 218-220.

Meyer, Ronald Bruce. "Herman Melville (1819)." *Freethought Almanac*. Accessed October 18, 2015. http://freethoughtalmanac.com/?p=2788.

Miano, David. "The Development of American Unitarian Theology." *American Unitarian Conference*. 2006. http://www.americanunitarian.org/mianotheology.htm.

Modern, John Lardas. *Secularism in Antebellum America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

New, Elisa. "Bible Leaves! Bible Leaves! Hellenism and Hebraism in Melville's *Moby-Dick*." *Poetics Today* 19, no. 2 (Summer, 1998): 281-303.

Nixon, Nicola. "Compromising Politics and Herman Melville's *Pierre*." *American Literature* 69, no. 4 (Dec., 1997). 719-741. 727.

Oliver, Egbert S. "Melville's Goneril and Fanny Kemble." *The New England Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (Dec., 1945): 489-500.

———. "Melville's Picture of Emerson and Thoreau in *The Confidence-Man*." *College English* 8 (Nov., 1946): 61-72.

Otter, Samuel. "The Eden of Saddle Meadows: Landscape and Ideology in *Pierre*." *American Literature* 66, no. 1 (Mar. 1994): 55-81.

Parker, Herschel. *Herman Melville: A Biography, Volume 2, 1851-1891*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002.

———. "Melville's Satire of Emerson and Thoreau: An Evaluation of the Evidence." *American Transcendental Quarterly*, 7 (Summer 1970): 61-67.

Peña, Laura López. *Beyond the Walls: Being with Each Other in Herman Melville's Clarel*. Valencia: University of Valencia, 2015.

"Positive Atheism's Big List of Quotations," *Positive Atheism Magazine*. Accessed October 18, 2015. http://www.positiveatheism.org/hist/quotes/quote-m1b.htm.

Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001.

Robertson-Lorant, Laurie. "Mr. Omoo and the Hawthornes: The Biographical Background." *Hawthorne and Melville: Writing a Relationship*. Edited by Jana L. Argersinger and Leland S. Person. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008.

Rosenthal, Debra J. "The Sentimental Appeal to Salvific Paternity in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Moby-Dick*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 56, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 135-147.

Rowe, John Carlos. *At Emerson's Tomb: The Politics of Classic American Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

Savage, Minot J. *Our Unitarian Gospel*. Boston: G.H. Ellis, 1898. Accessed September 20, 2016. http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/18578/pg18578-images.html.

Schaeffer, Francis. *How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1983.

Schneider, Herbert Wallace. "At Sea." *A History of American Philosophy*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1946. 255-263.

Sealts, Merton M. "Melville and Emerson's Rainbow (1980)." *Pursuing Melville, 1940-1980: Chapters and Essays*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982. 250-277.

Seelye, John. "*Pierre*, *Kavanagh*, and the Unitarian Perplex." *Melville's Evermoving Dawn: Centennial Essays*. Edited by John Bryant and Robert Milder. Kent: Kent State University Press, 1997. 375-392.

Shulman, Robert. "The Serious Functions of Melville's Phallic Jokes." *American Literature* 33 no. 2 (May, 1961): 179-194.

Smith, Christian and Robert Faris. "Socioeconomic Inequality in the American Religious System: An Update and Assessment." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44, no. 1 (2005): 95-104.

Spengemann, William C. Introduction to *Pierre: or, The Ambiguities*, by Herman Melville, vii-xx. New York: Penguin, 1996.

Thom, John Hamilton. "Christianity Not the Property of Critics and Scholars; But the Gift of God to All Men." John Hamilton Thom, James Martineau, and Henry Giles. *Unitarianism Defended*. London: Kinder, 1839. Accessed October 25, 2015. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/49930/49930-h/49930-h.htm.

Thompson, Lawrance. *Melville's Quarrel With God*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952.

Trimpi, Helen P. *Melville's Confidence Men and American Politics in the 1850s*. Hamden: Archon Books, 1987.

———. "Three of Melville's Confidence Men: William Cullen Bryant, Theodore Parker, and Horace Greeley." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 21, no. 3 (Fall 1979): 368-395.

"Unitarian Church of All Souls." *Wikipedia*. Accessed October 18, 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unitarian_Church_of_All_Souls.

Vargish, Thomas. "Gnostic Mythos in Moby-Dick." *PMLA* 81, no. 3 (Jun., 1966): 272-277.

Vincent, Howard P. *The Trying-Out of Moby Dick*. New York: Southern Illinois Press, 1949.

Wald, Priscilla. "Hearing Narrative Voices in Melville's *Pierre*," *Boundary* 2 (Spring 1990): 100-132.

Watson, Jr., Charles N. "Melville and the Themes of Timonism: From *Pierre* to *The Confidence-Man*." *On Melville*. Edited by Louis J. Budd and Edwin Harrison Cady. Durham: Duke University Press, 1988. 172-187.

Yothers, Brian. *Sacred Uncertainty: Religious Difference and the Shape of Melville's Career*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015.