



Attire of language in the writings of Herman Melville

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Abstract

Language is the heart and soul of a literary piece. Style, technique, and diction are abounding in Melville's works. Not only in *Moby Dick*, the genius of Melville can be seen from *Mardi* to *Pierre* and poetical works & letters. The use of literary devices such as metaphors and allusions have allowed for the reader to interpret characters' actions and appearance from an entirely new angle, enriching the text and promoting its value. Melville's use of such writing techniques and literary elements has helped the novel to gain credibility throughout time and has increased the depth of the novel's ideas.

Key Words: heart, soul, poetical, letters, metaphors, allusions, interpret, technique, credibility....

This journey begins with *Mardi*, his first novel. The book is technically flawed by an agenda that is overly ambitious for Melville's expertise to manage effectively; however, it embodies qualities of beauty, spirit, and urgency that anticipate the maturity of Melville's creative powers in *Moby-Dick*. The central symbol in *Mardi* is that of the voyage, which begins literally but then evolves into the realm of the allegorical and symbolic; the individual adventurers become representative of humanity, and the islands they sail among become the whole world (Mason 49). Taji, Yillah, and Hautia are the only three characters that function allegorically in the text. The idealistic and willful Taji, in searching to find the lost Yillah, seeks to find a lost innocence that cannot be regained. Ultimately, she represents a state of perfection, goodness, and total happiness that is inconsistent with human life. Taji's "Yillah" cannot be found wherever evil exists; and since evil is universal, a condition of existence, Yillah can never be discovered—indeed, does not exist. As the more philosophical Babbalanja finally tells Taji, "She is a phantom that but mocks thee" (James E. Miller Jr. 47). The converse of Yillah, Hautia beckons Taji by calling, "Come! Let us sin, and be merry" (*Mardi* 1312). She signifies the converse of Yillah, the world of the flesh and the spiritual death that results from excessive sensuality and pride. During their search for Yillah, the travelers visit 16 islands and pass by others, discussing the characteristics of each in a satirical style that is reminiscent of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. A satire is a literary work that exposes human folly and vice through sarcasm, irony, or wit. In particular through his use of irony—a literary style in which the intended meaning is opposite from the literal meaning—Melville offers wide-ranging social criticism on contemporary issues of religious, political, economic, sexual, literary, and philosophical import. Even today's readers can easily identify the major countries and institutions that are being critiqued.

Dominora, for instance, is Great Britain, Franko is France, and Vivenza is the United States. Similarly, Maramma stands for Roman Catholicism, and Serenia represents a spiritual realm of Christianity that is free of dogma and institutional dictates. Topical satire is only of secondary interest to Melville, however; his primary concern is with the universal. As a result, the sea comes most fully to represent the mythical timelessness of truth and the ideal fullness and unity of human consciousness.

In *Redburn*, rites of passages—the rituals that define transitions between life stages—are central both to the process of self-identification and socialization. By embarking on “His First Voyage,” Redburn initially seeks to regain the security and lost innocence of his childhood rather than to achieve and celebrate his independent manhood. Thus the romantic “Old World” of England, with all of its ties to father and fatherland, is a fitting destination, as is the circular nature of the journey that ends up back where it began in the dynamic “New World” of America. Before he leaves home, Redburn contemplates the old glass ship that his father brought home to America from Europe. Refusing to repair the broken spars and ropes or the fallen figurehead within the glass, Redburn feels a “secret sympathy” with the fallen sailor, and makes of this figure a model of his own romantic expectations of how he will set his life right again at sea. In sending Redburn off, his older brother gives him a hand-me-down shooting jacket, which has numerous symbolic implications. Not only does the secondhand nature of this gift reflect the family’s poverty, but it also suggests his family’s fall from the world of affluence and leisure, where such garments are worn. Further, as such a jacket is designed to be worn on land, not at sea; it is wholly inappropriate to his new environment and so represents his lack of experience and knowledge of the world he is entering. Melville continues the motif of family in Redburn’s search for a reliable guide. The youth begins his new life by turning first of all to the captain, who quickly fails as a surrogate father. Redburn’s father’s outdated guide book to Liverpool proves equally ineffective, causing Redburn finally to realize that “the thing that had guided the father could not guide the son” (Redburn 171). His symbolic encounter with the starving family of Launcelott’s-Hey and the visit he and Harry make to London also reveal to Redburn the corruption of England. As a result of these experiences, his misguided search to reconnect with his father’s memory and recover his innocence in the Old World ends, and Redburn turns back toward America, which represents his independent identity, both individually and nationally. Redburn’s fate is contrasted ultimately with that of both Harry Bolton and Jackson. By rejecting the genteel weakness of Harry and the evil hardness of Jackson, Redburn finds a healthy balance and independent identity for himself.

Whereas *Redburn* examines “the spiritual and imaginative growth of a single man...*White Jacket* shows the scope of Melville’s study immeasurably widened”. He is here primarily interested in “The World in a Man-of-War,” rather than in the narrator-sailor. As a result, the ship serves as the central symbol in *White-Jacket*. In his descriptions of both the ship and its crew, Melville depicts a highly organized and rigidly structured society that is efficient, rational, and brutally inhumane. Although the *Never sink* exists in the realm of sea, not land, Melville draws analogies between the two realms so that his portrait of the ship becomes a critique of antebellum American society. In particular, Melville uses the repeated motif or image of flogging to force his mid-nineteenth-century readers to draw an analogy between sailors and slaves (Otter 55–58). The other key symbol in *White Jacket* is the garment the narrator makes for himself and introduces in the first chapter. The ambiguities inherent in the jacket are obvious from the beginning. Because he devised the jacket to protect himself from inclement weather, it can be deemed a “life jacket.” From the beginning, however, the narrator also identifies the jacket with death. Anticipating the emphasis on the color white in *Moby Dick*, the narrator calls the jacket “white as a shroud” (351). The jacket separates the narrator from the rest of the crew, and it increasingly becomes a burden to its

wearer. The “jacket also has a more corporeal dimension. It is padded, porous,” and again it is white. “The jacket is skin” (Otter 87). Although originally meant to protect the narrator, this skin becomes degraded because of its association with slavery through flogging. Ultimately, White Jacket cuts himself free of this skin and is miraculously reborn. However, “White Jacket’s removal of his skin is a procedure, like the surgeon of the fleet’s, directed at the cuticle and not at the quick. It offers a fantasy cure for the social and somatic diagnoses of *White-Jacket*,” and the final chapter “suggests that the narrator’s corporeal escape is illusory” (Otter 95–96). As White Jacket observes, “There are no mysteries out of ourselves” (768).

As far as Pierre is concerned, on one level, it can be read as a moral allegory that reworks the myth of the Fall of Man in the story of the title character’s loss of innocence. Although critics are divided as to whether Melville’s intentions were wholly satirical in creating the pattern of imagery that sustains this reading, this design does in some ways serve to unify the novel in spite of the many ambiguities that threaten to dissolve its coherence. Saddle Meadows is consistently, although often ironically, described as a green Eden that exists beyond the limits of time, frozen in a “trance-like aspect” (*Pierre* 7). Meanwhile, Pierre is clearly Adamic in his youthful innocence and naivety, qualities that his fiancée Lucy matches as Eve. Saddle Meadows “is essentially feudal in its life and government, and Pierre, like many of Melville’s heroes, is cut off from the world by his feeling of innate superiority”...., Thus, as an aristocrat..., Pierre is sole heir to a way of life which cannot long survive in the midst of democratic America, ‘a vulgar caldron of an everlasting un-crystallizing Present’. Although Melville takes care “to qualify this American Eden by undermining its social structure and the heritage with which it protects its heir,” Pierre himself is “unfallen, even though his innocence...is not wholly perfect” (Moorman 18, 19). Isabel’s entrance marks the disruption of Eden, but although she is shadowy and mysterious, Melville does not link her directly with evil. “The serpent imagery in *Pierre* clusters about the fall situation rather than about any single character” (Moorman 21). Isabel’s tale incorporates serpent imagery, but Pierre, too, is called “‘reptile! reptile! that could sting so sweet a breast’” by Lucy’s maid, and Mrs. Glendenning’s beauty is also associated with “venom” in the same passage (*Pierre* 236). Melville’s intent is that the situation be observed as evil rather than any specific character. In the second half of the novel, the imagery is correspondingly dark and cold, in keeping with the fallen condition of Pierre, who has gained knowledge of good and evil through his embrace of Isabel.

As the subtitle of novel warns, however, Melville does not seem to be interested merely in the straightforward level of allegory. He also uses images in a recurring pattern to frustrate any simplistic interpretation of characters, settings, and events. In particular, Melville “consistently counterpoises the green fertility of vegetation with the arid intractability of stone” (Strickland 303). Pierre’s name itself means “stone” in French, which links him to two of the most “dominant images of *Pierre*: “the Memnon Stone, with its threat of crushing weight, and the Enceladus Rock, trapped by the earth in a gesture of futile defiance and aspiration” (Grenberg 122). Symbolic of God, the inscrutable and silent Memnon Stone, which Pierre also calls the “Terror Stone,” offers the protagonist no solace or guidance when he turns to it for a sign of what he should do in the moral dilemma that Isabel’s story raises (*Pierre* 161). Near the end of the novel, Pierre dreams about the earthbound Titan Enceladus and the symbolic rock he bears, suggesting his own feelings of hopelessness in struggling against the forces that thwart him.

Imagery of marble also links many of the novel’s seeming oppositions, oppositions that appear most strikingly in Melville’s depiction of Lucy and Isabel: light and dark, good and evil, heart and head (Strickland 303). Similarly, Pierre’s father is described in terms of stone and marble, consistent with both his manufactured sainthood and his lifelessness. In his

heart, Pierre has enshrined “the perfect marble form of his departed father; without blemish, unclouded, snow-white, and serene; Pierre’s fond personification of perfect human goodness and virtue.” Having lost his father’s living presence, he has “marbleized” his memory into an idealized vision to guide and sustain him (Pierre 83).

As part of this effort, the son has also built an actual shrine to his father, a closet in which hangs one of two portraits of the dead man. These portraits serve as the central symbols in *Pierre*. Pierre’s mother cherishes the official portrait, which hangs in the drawing room of Saddle Meadows, because it represents her husband as a “middle-aged, married man “who “seemed to possess all the nameless and slightly portly tranquilities, incident to that condition when a felicitous one” (*Pierre* 88). In contrast, the smaller “chair-portrait” in Pierre’s closet reflects the father as a “brisk, un-entangled, young bachelor, gaily ranging up and down in the world, light-hearted, and a very little bluish perhaps; and charged to the lips with the first uncloying morning fullness and freshness of life” (90, 88).

Herman chose sea “land” for the ground to sow the seed of his novels which is itself very tricky, if not, strange or suggestive. Sea is the most unpredictable place in the universe--outcome is always vague and uncertain. Water is the land where life begins. Sea is as mysterious as a mother’s womb. Even the creator does not know or determine the fate of its creation and this is the beauty of life. This uncertainty runs in all the novel of Melville, especially in *Moby Dick* where “white” is not a color but the mother of all colors. Melville’s literary works have much rich grounds for everyone to either criticize or beautify by appreciating his genius. Melville’s novels have innumerable shades and colors to satisfy the creative appetite of others.

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