

Melville's Codes and Ambiguities in *Pierre*: Critical Dimensions Re-Examined

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Abstract

This paper explores the various critical approaches to Herman Melville's *Pierre* and reveals that the novel is not a book of eccentricities and incoherence, as has been claimed by some critics; rather, it reflects its author's philosophical mind and sophistication. Through a close study of the various theoretical approaches to the novel, this study shows that the ambiguities of *Pierre* are not an indication of the novelist's lack of control over his narrative, but rather a reflection of the fact that he intended the book for a particular audience, namely the highly-educated individuals.

Key words: Melville; *Pierre*; Theoretical approaches; Ambiguities; Codes

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INTRODUCTION

Herman Melville's seventh novel *Pierre; or the Ambiguities* has received a scathing criticism from readers, who preferred the domestic and sentimental novels. The book was dismissed as complex, unreadable, highly philosophical, and incoherent. In fact, *Pierre* was the second blow to Melville's popularity at that time; the first one was the negative reception that *Moby Dick* received due to its blasphemous themes and difficulty. Due to the decline in Melville's popularity, Melville was

in a bad mental and financial stress; hence, he was writing *Pierre* out of depression, distress, and disappointment with the world and his readers. Melville's alienation from his readers is clearly expressed in the last third of the novel when Pierre becomes a writer in the city trying to earn a living to support his household in a hostile and inhospitable world. In fact, in *Pierre*, Melville sat to write a book in which to express his ideas and thoughts without paying attention to money and fame, which were suggested by many early critics like Lewis Mumford and Raymond Weaver.

Because Melville was in a bad mental and financial state when he was writing the novel, he did not have a perfect control of his narrative as in his previous sea-adventure narratives. Therefore, contemporary readers took that as a sign of decline in Melville's skills as a writer. Readers did not find *Pierre* as entertaining as the earlier narratives because the novel was considered unusual and unreadable, especially the theme of incest, which was considered as an unspeakable topic in that society. Thus, for almost seventy years Melville's works were neglected and readers have failed to realize the real value and depth of this sophisticated writer.

Starting from the early 1920s, Melville's works were explored and studied thoroughly, resulting in new insights and depths, which revealed many important issues related to the nineteenth-century social, economic, cultural, and political issues. Hence, Melville was appreciated and taken seriously in the early 1920s and continued to be appreciated and explored through the whole twentieth century until the present time as a writer who revolutionized the American literary canon. Through the lenses of the various critical approaches, Melville was rediscovered and elevated as an icon in American Literature. While contemporary readers took Melville's works as a source of mere entertainment, twentieth-century literary critics realized that Melville's works contained some serious issues smuggled into the lines

of his books, which needed intelligent and insightful audience to dig up. Literary criticism was able to open new avenues into Melville's works, which drew attention to serious issues necessary for understanding nineteenth-century American culture. *Pierre*, which was dismissed as complex and inappropriate, was highly appreciated by modern critics and considered one of Melville's finest works, for in its complexities and oddities were smuggled Melville's finest thoughts and intellectual depth that few writers would be able to exhibit. While contemporary critics deemed *Pierre* as an indication of Melville's decline as an author, literary critics in the 1920s were able to discover new insights that were unexplored before. What the contemporary readers took as a sign of Melville's failure as a writer, the twentieth-century critics, however, took as a sign of advancement and sophistication in his intellectual power. Literary critics were able to reveal the real depth and value of this book by showing that Melville used the novel's oddities, eccentricities in its language and structure and even in its themes as a sophisticated way of hiding his serious messages behind allusions, symbolic characters and themes. *Pierre* has lent itself greatly to the various critical approaches including historicism, new-criticism, feminism, race theory, queer theory, cultural theory, and psychoanalysis.

DISCUSSION

Historical/biographical criticism initiated the journey of discovery of this novel and opened the road for further critical exploration. Critics like Lewis Mumford, Brian Higgins, and Hershel Parker made seminal studies of the novel and its author, which lay the foundation for the later critical explorations during the late twentieth century. These critics aimed at clarifying all the mysteries associated with the writing of *Pierre* by connecting its contents with all the complications that characterized Melville's life at the time. Their concern was to show that the narrative complexities of the novel were not a sign of a decline in Melville's skills as a writer, but rather a reflection of his mental and financial stresses. They indicated that these oddities in narrative structure and themes have been the major reasons for the contemporary readers' failure to decipher Melville's obscured messages. Hence, these critics gave new dimensions and opened new horizons into the novel.

Lewis Mumford was central in the early Melvillean studies. Many critics, to be explored later, based their studies on his observations. In his "Amor, Threatening," Mumford links many themes of *Pierre* with events in Melville's life at the time he was writing the novel. He poses some questions about Melville's exclusion of women from his earlier works. For instance, he associates Melville's troubled relations with his wife and daughters, following the death of his first son, with his tendency to "dissociate women from his account of man's deepest

experience" (pp.137-139). Mumford views Melville, whose "world is, all too literally, a man-of-war's world," as a misogynist (p.138). Mumford's observations were of great use to the later feminist critics. In additions, his insights regarding the author's mental anxieties and stress at the time he was writing the novel made the basic foundation that inspired the later psychological approaches to the book. He alludes to the fact that *Pierre* represents Melville's unconscious mind, his anxieties, which inspired the later Freudian approaches related to sexual anxiety and male hysteria. Mumford sees *Pierre*'s sexual symbols as the unconscious revelation of his dilemmas as a writer (pp.138-142). Furthermore, he alludes to Melville's blasphemous themes, which proved useful to the later New-Critical studies. Mumford concludes by asserting that *Pierre* is indeed "a book of fragments, and the fragments are worth mining and extracting" (p.152).

Higgins's and Parker's seminal biographical research in the mid 1970s have resolved many mysteries about the book and opened the opportunity for further critical studies about Melville. Their study has shown that the discrepancy in style between the first two thirds of the book and the last third is directly related to Melville's mental dilemma. Melville's desperate mood, poverty, poor health conditions, and the financial crisis were among the many factors that drove Melville to write "impulsively and lose control over his story" (pp.244-45). Higgins and Parker were concerned about the inserted chapters of the book when *Pierre* suddenly appears as a writer in the city. They maintain that "the inserted parts were the product of a different impulse and mood than the original manuscript" (p.245). Thus, biographical/historical criticism paved the way for the later boom in Melville studies which reached its zenith in the late twentieth century.

Pierre has opened itself greatly to the New-Critical studies during the mid twentieth century. Critics Lawrence Thompson, F. O. Matthiessen, William Braswell, Richard Chase, R. K. Gupta, and Miss Haave have examined Melville's use of symbols to communicate his religious themes and other concerns. Gupta explores such symbols as *Pierre*'s burning of his father's "chair-portrait as a symbol of his complete disavowal of his social heritage" (p.122). Other symbols he explores include the Memnon Stone and the Enceladus; he suggests that the "significance of these symbols is thematic: they provide mythological parallels to the situation of the hero" (p.123). Thompson interprets *Pierre* as a "thinly veiled and consistently worked-out allegory of Melville's "quarrel with God" (qtd in. Gupta, p.121). Matthiessen points out that Melville's "doctrine of cunningly linked analogies is closely akin to Emerson's proposition that "every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact" (qtd in. Gupta, p.121). Miss Haave asserts that "Melville's use of symbolism in *Pierre* is an attempt to communicate and not to hide his central meaning" (qtd in. Gupta, p.123). William Braswell has

examined Melville's continuous change of "technique and tone to accord with his intentions" (p.284). By explaining these techniques, Braswell shows that Melville intended the early love scenes to parody the sentimental writings of his time (pp.285-89). Thus, New-Criticism paved the way further for the later boom in the critical studies of this novel by showing that many elements of the novel, once a source of puzzlement to contemporary readers, are symbolic and that Melville used them as a way of communicating his themes. For instance, the later queer theorists built on New-Critics' studies of symbolism to explore the homosexual themes. In addition, based on the New-Critics' assumptions that the book abounds with symbolism, racial criticism made very illuminating studies of Melville's use of the colors black and red as a way of communicating his anti-racial attitude subtly.

Exploration of the homoerotic themes in the novel dates back to the 1950s with such critics as Richard Chase and Walter Sutton. These two critics briefly pointed to the existence of homosexual allusions in the novel. Chase claimed that "Melville's estrangement from society and his consciousness of his estrangement have something to do with what today we would call sexuality"; he indirectly suggests that "many of Melville's pathologies and fears resulted from his sexual tensions" (qtd in Creech, p.61). With the rise of many late-twentieth-century progressive and radical movements such as the Civil Rights Movement, the Feminist movement, and the Gay Rights movement, Gay criticism, with the newly-won sexual freedom and the new changes in social attitudes about sexuality, gained momentum in opening new insights that revolutionized Melvillean studies.

In his *Closet Writing / Gay Reading*, James Creech presented a monumental study of the homosexual themes of the novel. The anti-homosexual sentiment which permeated the late 1960s gave gay critics new freedom in the field, which resulted in giving the book new dimensions about Melville's hidden homosexual secrets. Creech asserts that straight criticism, such as deconstruction, cannot bring the homosexual meanings to light because of its reductiveness and limitations; he maintains: "against this pervasive form of literary-critical reductionism, a criticism undertaking, against all odds, to re-queer the censored text is an important phase of lesbian and gay literary criticism. And putting homosexuality back into its rightful place is a literary criticism in the fullest sense" (p.29). Therefore, he presents a "Camp Reading" which stresses the importance of "identification" when studying homoeroticism in a text. He avers that a work of a gay writer is meant to be read by sympathetic readers, gay readers, who have better ability to identify with the text and its maker (pp.42-43). Creech's argument reveals that *Pierre* is full of codes through which Melville intended to hide his homosexual themes because homosexuality was a dangerous topic in the nineteenth-century American culture where there was very limited

sexual freedom. Therefore, Melville had to use codes and disguises to cover his sexual allusions (pp.112-117, 165). Creech suggests that "Isabel is a feminine cover for what is psychologically and logically a male character," meaning Isabel is the incarnation of Pierre's father, and Pierre's attraction to her is a disguised homoerotic attraction to his father (p.155). He suggests that Melville used the incest theme as a "Trojan Horse" through which he "smuggled" his homoerotic anxieties into the text (pp.122-128). Pierre's "masturbatory indulgence before the quasi-pornographic image of his father" (p.141) is another supporting argument that Creech makes based on Pierre's closeting of his father's chair-portrait. Indeed, Creech's argument is insightful and illuminating; it gave the text to new dimensions of the possibility that Melville might have been a gay and due to the homophobia of nineteenth-century America, he had to fill his book with codes and ambiguities as a cover. Still, ambiguities of other kinds continue to be uncovered by other critical approaches.

Racial criticism found new ways into the novel during the late 1990s through the 21st century; it revealed Melville's radical attitudes to racial discrimination against Blacks and Native Indians. In fact, racial criticism has built its assumptions on cultural studies about this book, which I will explore later in this paper. Critics Nancy Sweet, Robert Levine, and Oshima Yukiko were the major critics who approached the novel from the lens of racial theory.

Sweet's argument reveals the political conflict about racial discrimination with respect to the Fugitive Slave Law. She explains that Pierre's anxiety to "reconcile himself with his newly-discovered dark half sister" is due to his "entrenched belief about white superiority" (p.3). She asserts that "Melville uses his love story to address the competing doctrines of idealism and expediency at the center of political discourse among abolitionists and Northern politicians" (p.4). Oshima presents a valid argument by looking at Isabel as a Native Indian, thus revealing Melville's radical attitudes against the displacement of Native Indians. He makes references to the color "red" to suggest that Isabel has "Native American blood" (p.7). Levine, on the other hand, looks at Isabel's racial identity as black by scrutinizing Melville's ironic use of the "genealogical motif" (p.23). He builds his argument on the symbolic use of the color black particularly the incident when Pierre burns his father's portrait and gets his hands blackened. He uses this incident to show how "Melville offers both veiled and blatant suggestions about racial significance of the blackening" (p.23). Levine suggests that "Pierre's (and his mother's and culture's) concern about genealogy and identity is concerns about genealogy and race" (p.25). These discoveries are a clear indication that Melville's writings were not becoming complex and philosophical, but most likely that he intended such novels

for a particular audience, perhaps the highly-educated intellectuals or political authorities.

Feminist critics added new insights about Melville's attitude to women of the nineteenth-century America. The early feminist reading of the novel was based on certain biographical information related to Melville's relationship with his wife Elizabeth and his daughters. Early critics Raymond Weaver, Richard Chase, and Lewis Mumford believed that Melville was a misogynist because of his exclusion of women from his works. In his 1972 dissertation about Melville, Fred Pinnegar points out that the position of these early scholars was "grounded in a Freudian reading of Melville's biography—in their interpretation of a female-or mother-damaged Melville" (qtd in. Schultz & Haskell, p.7). Thus, early scholars failed to study the novel within the cultural context, especially the general socioeconomic condition of women; in fact, they failed to take into consideration how women were victims of a patriarchal culture. Mid twentieth-century feminist critics looked into *Pierre* through the lens of new-criticism; they focused on the male narrator's experience rather than on the situation of women (Schultz & Haskell, p.8).

Furthermore, *Pierre* has opened itself greatly to Psychoanalytic criticism since the mid 1970s; it has been given deeper psychological dimensions. Themes like incest, the Oedipal complex, anxiety, sexuality, the unconscious, and male hysteria were deeply discussed by many scholar, including, but not limited to, R. Scott Kellner, Paula Miner-Quinn, Joan Margretta, and Stephen Rachman. These themes, once a source of confusion and ambiguities, have been explored in relation to Melville's mental and sexual anxieties, which provided new insights into this complicated book and sophisticated maker.

Kellner offered an insightful study of numerous psychological themes in the novel. Exploring *Pierre*'s insecurity and sexual confusion, Kellner asserts that *Pierre*'s "relationship with his mother has confused and stymied his sexual identity (p.8). He maintains that "this femininity in *Pierre*'s nature is expressed in homosexual overtones in his relations with Glen Stanley and Lucy's brothers" (Ibid.). In addition, Kellner explores the Oedipal theme in the novel; he shows how *Pierre*, by running away with Isabel, his surrogate mother, is able to satisfy his incestuous longings to take his father's place with his real mother (p.14). Further, Kellner deepens his exploration of these psychological themes by discussing the many phallic symbols that reflect *Pierre*'s sexual longings for his sister Isabel, such as *Pierre*'s "cane," Isabel's guitar, and the "pine-tree" (pp.15-18). Miner-Quinn examines Melville's use of the incest theme as to direct readers "away from the more powerful (but subtle) themes of possible impotency and homosexuality that underlie all other sexual problems in the book" (p.111). She suggests that this aspect of the novel might reflect Melville's own sexual anxieties. Margretta discusses how Melville was

concerned with the "double ego," the conscious ego and the subconscious one, an issue that the whole nineteenth century was preoccupied with (pp.234-44). She maintains that Melville was "in sympathy with the voluntarist rebellion in philosophy and psychology, which changed the traditional authority of reason, rejecting rationality as an adequate guide to human truth" (p.235). Stephen Rachman explores the theme of male hysteria in relation to *Pierre* and the nineteenth-century culture, which was highly preoccupied with the psychology and the issue of madness (pp.226-28).

In addition, as I indicated earlier, the early 1970s witnessed the rise of various progressive movements such as the gay rights movements and the feminist movement, which occasioned a change in the general attitude towards Melville as a misogynist. Unlike the early Melvillean scholars, who did not take the cultural context of women's socio-economic condition into consideration, late twentieth-century scholars based their studies on close examination of the cultural context of Melville's age. Therefore, these modern scholars produced more advanced and illuminating studies, which gave *Pierre* and other Melvillean books new dimensions. Critics Kris Lackey, Wyn Kelly, and Wendy Flory made significant studies about this novel. Lackey asserts that "*Pierre* reproduces a symbolic sexual economy, derived from allegory and romance, in which women appear largely as projections of male consciousness, variously pathetic, menacing, domineering, and servile" (p.68). Schultz and Haskell indicate that Melville lived in New York and admired women's performances in the theater and operas. He was influenced by women's advocates Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucy Stone (p.4). They contend that although not many women appear in his writings as major characters, his works "reveal his consciousness of powerful and self-actualized individual women as well as of women's sexuality, of women's disempowerment, and of working women's lives (p.4). Kelly avers that Melville joined many nineteenth-century women writers in their quest for women's rights (p.91). By offering a different kind of domesticity, one that is founded on fraternal love rather than marriage, Melville made a "radical change to social conventions" (p.92). Flory "sees the four women in *Pierre* as psychologically symbolic characters personifying dimensions of Melville's mind" (qtd in. Schultz & Haskell, p.10). She suggests that "in all the specifics of Isabel's detailed characterization, she personifies the creative imagination; she is carefully particularized as the Melvillean imagination" (p.121). Still, more profound critical explorations of this superb novel can be found in other approaches, which gave it further dimensions.

Late twentieth-century cultural studies read *Pierre* as an important cultural and historical document about nineteenth-century America. Samuel Otter sees the novel as Melville's representation of Saddle Meadows

as his “picturesque project” that “portrays the American landscape, represents the historical struggle between competing interests, and an arena in which entire population had been displaced and enslaved” (p.352). Otter asserts that the novel abounds with allusions and images that reflect the “centuries-long struggle for literal and figurative possession of the American land” (p.353). He suggests that “possession is asserted in the name of race, evoking Anglo-Saxon authority in the struggle over American land” (p.355). The landscape in *Pierre* is “possessed by his (Pierre’s) race, which reminds us that Saddle Meadows has been sanctified through blood, particularly the blood of Indian Battles (p.355). He broadens his argument by talking about several historical events, such as the Anti-Renters Wars, during which the poor revolted against their feudal landlords, and president’s Jackson’s hypocritical promise to the Creek Indians to occupy Oklahoma. Otter states that “Melville associates the possession of the land with the exploitation of poor whites and native Indians” (p.360). He concludes his argument by saying that Melville’s description of Saddle Meadows is structured with reminders of those who were dispossessed (p.361). Jean Ashton, in his “Imagining Pierre: Reading the Extra-Illustrated Melville,” points to the importance of referring to guidebooks and pamphlets in periodicals and descriptions of mid-century New York to a better understanding of the novel because *Pierre* abounds with scenes and references that are “carefully grounded in historical reality” (p.329). These scenes show how Melville depicted the chaos of the city and the dangers, such as those encountered by Isabel, and the conversion of religious churches, such as the Apostles, into commercial buildings. Of course, Melville’s allusions to all these urban aspects reflect his critique of the growing materialism and capitalism in the city, where the poor, like Pierre and Isabel, have no place. These insightful observations reflect the depth in which this novel has been explored and present a solid evidence that Melville was fully in control of what he was writing and alluding to.

CONCLUSION

After all, one is compelled to acknowledge that the critical exploration of this superb book does not end here; *Pierre* will remain Melville’s greatest masterpiece of ambiguities that attests to his literary genius and artistic creativity. *Pierre* will remain inexhaustible book that will continue to be an invaluable document and an essential resource for studying American literature and culture. In spite of all the researches and studies that have been conducted so far about this sophisticated piece of art, critics believe that it will remain an ambiguous and profound text that still contains many indecipherable issues yet to be explored. Thus, for one to understand the real value and depth

of Melville’s writings, he/she is compelled to struggle through the ambiguities of *Pierre*.

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