

American Culture at the Cross Road in the Early Novels of Herman Melville

*¹Dr. Om Prakash Tiwari and ²Peter Xess

¹Associate Professor, Department of English, Dr. C.V. Raman University, Kota, Chhattisgarh

²Research Scholar, Department of English, Dr. C.V. Raman University, Kota, Chhattisgarh

ABSTRACT

America's culture is moving in a new and dangerous direction, as it becomes more accepting and tolerant of dishonesty and financial abuse. Tamar Frankel argues that this phenomenon is not new: in fact it has a specific traceable past. During the past thirty years temptations and opportunities to defraud have risen; legal, moral and theoretical barriers to abuse of trust have fallen. Moreover, considering the American West as a "cultural crossroads", and interpreting its past in terms of "convergence", as historian Stephen Aron has done over the last decade, opens wider perspectives. While the New Western History stressed the ethnic and racial diversity of the West, and studied its past through the prism of multiculturalism, the new emphasis on convergence" highlights the connections, interactions, exchanges, and "the complex weave of cross-cultural connections that these interactions have generated" (Aron 4).

Keywords: American Culture, Herman Melville, Moby Dick

Article Publication

Published Online: 15-Mar-2021

*Author's Correspondence

Dr. Om Prakash Tiwari

Associate Professor, Department of English,
Dr. C.V. Raman University, Kota,
Chhattisgarh

✉ [mailerom\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:mailerom[at]gmail.com)

© 2021The Authors. Published by Research
Review Journals

This is an open access article under the CC

BY-NC-ND license 

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

Herman Melville was born in New York City in 1819. He worked as a crew member on several vessels beginning in 1839, his experiences spawning his successful early novels Typee (1846) and Omoo (1847). Subsequent books, including his masterpiece Moby-Dick (1851), sold poorly and by the 1860s Melville had turned to poetry. Following his death in New York City in 1891, he posthumously came to be regarded as one of the great American writers. Herman Melville is an embarrassment to American Literature. He is an embarrassment because he is outrageous in his use of the forms of fiction to convey his unique vision of life. Literary critics cannot ignore him or be indifferent to his works because some of the most profound and enduring American themes have found their most dramatic and arresting exemplification in the nineteenth century literature of America, predominantly in his fiction. Situation like this poses problems to critics and academics who must determine to their complete satisfaction the literary worth of Melville's fiction. But there is one thing almost all of them are agreed upon, and that is the persistence with which Melville can still, through his art suggest, provoke, enthuse and appeal. This is despite very strong critical inhibitions regarding the quality of his fiction. It is rather obvious from what has been said that to Melville the making of art is necessarily complex. This complexity reveals itself in the various forms he experimented with to convey a tortuous process of arriving at a focus. The natural question that arises is this: why should Melville make the creation of art such a complex proposition? The answer is not far to seek. Everything that Melville does in his fiction is dependent upon his preconceptions of 'truth' or 'reality.' One of the basic contentions of this thesis is that irrespective of the kind of fiction Melville wrote, his attitude to 'truth' was deliberately complex. To reflect this he subjected the means of communication -the forms of fiction -to a kind of treatment leading to problems of perception 2nd understanding. So one must, before anything else, define this truth as comprehended by Melville. In America of the nineteenth century writers like Hawthorne and James saw much sense in the use of a personal dialectic or idiom of reference to knowing truth. Such writers have managed to present a view

of life, coherent and consistent, disturbing though it may be. There is yet another category of writers to whom this truth' is anarchic, always elusive, and at times too terrible to behold.

Through the twentieth century, American culture took on new forms and meanings, spurred by technological innovation, commerce, and institutions and shaped by an ever changing population. In the process, American culture became self-consciously "modern" embraced, contested, repudiated, and continually redefined. The works of Herman Melville provide an illuminating study of an imaginative writer preoccupied with the dualities and ambiguities that are a part of the life of a human being. Melville's works gain greater coherence if examined from the point of view of the problem of Evil. This problem can be traced right from his earliest attempts at writing to his last work in 1891. From his first piece of writing *Fragments From A Writing Desk* (1839) Melville shows a preoccupation with the complex dualism which inheres in creation. The final anticlimax of the *Fragments* are his first attempt to portray the tragic reality that underlies dazzling appearance. The whole sequence of his works from type his first to *Billy Budd* his last, shows Melville examining the nineteenth-century American society which on the surface appeared organized and civilized but which at its roots was corrupt and grasping. For, despite the- pretence of virtue that characterized its official moral codes, society in all its aspects was founded to hypocrisy, exploitation and fraud, it was Melville's experience also that in the civilized world Sin that paid its way could travel freely and without a passport, whereas, virtue, if a pauper, was stopped at all frontiers. - What was remarkable about such a society was that it's proud commodores, senators and judges were the guiltier of inflicting misery on their fellow-men. In most of his works, more specially his earlier ones Melville's heroes are young innocents who plunge into the world of experience only to learn the world is full of evil hidden beneath a thin mask of innocence. And it is the way in which each of these heroes comes to grips with this world that gives Melville's works a single vision. His characters do not grow physically. They mature emotionally. Melville shows a special liking for the lonely, deserted, orphaned hero or the 'Ishmael' character who wanders round the earth in his search for the Ultimate. He has transformed the Biblical Ishmael to suit his own artistic, and symbolic, needs so that Ishmael of *Moby Dick* is as much an 'Ishmael' as Ahab is or as Pierre is or as Jackson of *Red burn* or Mortmain of *Clarel* are. When Melville returned home from his South Sea voyage, he saw American society in the process of a great- transformation. On the economic front, he saw America dedicated to industrialization and mechanization. Though these are aimed at bringing the maximum benefit to mankind, they brought in their train conditions which today Americans have learnt to take for granted but which then were causing great misery to the people. And what was remarkable was that industrialism was treated as a value in itself people encouraged it as the patron of the Renaissance encouraged art; not doubting that the activity was a great one, and made for a higher civilization. What kind of a civilization his country was heading for, Melville could very well imagine even when he wrote *Typee*. By the time he wrote *The Confidence-Man* (1857), the last of his full-length novels, he was so disillusioned with what was happening everywhere that the very foundation of his faith in the goodness of mankind was shaken. The characters of *The Confidence-Man* appear to be the types or representatives of the bustling, greedy, inventive American Middle West but actually they are representatives of an appalling human world, a splintered and a wolfish world, wherein, as R.W.B. Lewis says, the crafty and utterly self regarding denizens are intent chiefly on fleecing one another. On the political front too, Melville's countrymen were facing crucial problems. On one side they were advocating the highest principles of freedom and equality for themselves and for all mankind on the other they were refusing to share those-very privileges with the Negroes and the Indian of their own country. Added to that was their adoption of the policy of 'expansion' and colonization which brought untold misery not only to themselves but to those whom they were out to conquer and colonize. In October 1851, *The Whale*, printed later as *Moby Dick*, was published in London. The allegorical undertones that Melville cultivated throughout the novel picked up on the link between whaling and a mid-19th century emerging American identity. The story centres around the narrator Ishmael, a sailor on the Whaleship *Pequod*, The ship captain, Ahab, has lost his leg to *Moby Dick* on a previous expedition, and he is motivated to the point of derangement by revenge for the whale's life. Powered by this plot, Melville's *Moby Dick* spun the parable of the hunt for the great white whale as an emblem of the human condition and the reckless expansion of the American republic. Despite Melville's high expectations for *Moby Dick*, literary critics largely disregarded the novel. Many critics were impressed with the detailed account of whaling voyages, but during Melville's entire lifetime, the book sold only 3,000 copies. Interest in maritime adventures was dwindling as Americans were setting their imaginations towards the potential in the West. His first manuscript, a tale in which the narrator, Tommo, is captured by *Typee* cannibals was initially rejected in the United States because publishers refused to believe the validity of the story. The story was finally accepted in London, where Melville's older brother, Gansevoort, was working for the American Legation. *Typee* was published in Britain in February of 1846 to favourable reviews. Lauded for its ethnographic focus exploring the relationship between a New Englander and a foreign culture, Melville's story gained even more popularity after one of Herman's former crewmates came forward to validate its factual base. Not until the early 20th century was Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick* first recognized as a literary masterpiece and touted as a cornerstone of modern American literature.

Melville's was a reflective and philosophical mind and his love of speculative thought always led him away from the evils of his society to grapple with greater dilemmas.

References

1. Adelman, Jeremy, and Stephen Aron. June 1999, "From Borderlands to Borders; Empires, Nations-States, and the Peoples in between in North American History, *American Historical Review* 104 (3), 814-841. DOI: 10.2307/2650990
2. B Klein, Kerwin Lee, May 1996, "Reclaiming the "" Word, Or Being and Becoming Postwestern", *The Pacific Historical Review*, 65(2), 179-215. DOI : 10.2307/3639983
3. Limerick, Patricia Nelson, 2001, "Going West and Ending Up Global", *The Western Historical Quarterly*, 32 (1), Spring 5-23.
4. Millville, Herman, 1846, 'Typee', New York: Wiley and Putnam.
5. Millville, Herman, 1847, 'Omoo', New York: Harper and Brothers.
6. Turner, Frederick Jackson, 1996, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History", *The Frontier in American History*, New York: Dover Publications, 1-38.