

Depiction of Herman Melville's Spirit of Enthusiasm over Nature: A Study

E. Ranjith, M.A., M. Phil., B.Ed., Ph.D. Candidate

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Abstract

Melville's book is a delightful story in which the anthropological and geographical facts are subtly subordinated to the dramatic requirements of the yarn itself. Stewart's main points and ponderous conclusions are presented by Melville as personal impression or hearsay. Melville read so voraciously and borrowed so copiously, the burrowing's of scholars will continue to unearth examples of his literary larceny for a good while to come. As an example of its importance to his writing, one may recall that, by actual page count, nearly a quarter of *Moby Dick* is known to consist of cetological and whaling information taken from Thomas Beale's *The Natural History of the Sperm Whale* and a handful of other scientific sources. Yet Melville's powers of assimilation and of transmutation were so skillful, even when he came close to quoting source material almost verbatim, that the improvements in the final product over the original seem as mountainous as the White Whale himself. In *Moby Dick*, as in most of Melville's best work, the reader discovers a remarkable blending, and of the author's recollected experience, his voluminous reading, and the leaven of metaphorical. Melville's least admirable works are those in which these elements have been unevenly blended, the philosophical comments are blended through symbolism into an artistic unity.

Keywords: Herman Melville, Nature, subordinated, ponderous, larceny, cetological, assimilation, voluminous and voluminous.

In Melville's first novel, *Typee*, Greene figures in the story under the name of Toby. Shortly before the ship was to sail, Melville and Greene, having informed themselves as much as they could about the island and its inhabitants, escaped inland by laboriously climbing the tall cliffs that surrounded the bay. They struck out for a valley occupied by the Happa tribe, known to be friendly to white sailors. They planned to lie in hiding here until the ship's departure and then to live comfortably in Marquesan style for as long as pleased them. But they had not counted on the wild, hilly terrain of the interior and the impossibility of locating any familiar landmarks to guide them. After a day or two of struggling across rough and unpromising country, of resting little and eating almost nothing, they stumbled by miscalculation into the unfriendly territory of the Taipis, (Typees), a fierce tribe of reputed cannibals. During the journey across the hills Melville suffered

a mysterious injury or infection of the leg that annoyed him and occasionally incapacitated him for the next three months

Though the author was suffered by a mysterious and difficult injury he did not stop his journey and continued it. The Taipis, belying their savage reputation, admitted the two strangers to their villages with an outward show of hospitality. For a time the young Americans led an exciting, active, but comfortable and interesting life among their native hosts. As the days passed, however, their sojourn in the Taipi valley began to look more and more like a captivity. After a couple of weeks Toby was given permission to leave the valley in search of a doctor or medicines for Melville's ailing leg. He disappeared, and it was many months before his fate was learned. He had been impressed aboard a short-handed whaler then visiting the area to pick up stray crewmen. "Tommo," as Melville was called by the islanders, remained in the valley another two weeks, observing the native customs and constantly worrying about the risk of being eaten. He escaped at last through the help of men from the *Lucy Ann*, an Australian whaling barque. He always referred to his month among the Taipis with mixed feelings. While admiring the innocence of the natives and their unspoiled Rousseauesque existence and relishing his perhaps more than friendly association with the native beauty Fayaway, he also recalled his gnawing fear of becoming eventually the object of his hosts' cannibalistic tendencies.

Exactly the kind of work Melville had in mind when he first undertook the writing of what gradually and painfully grew into his masterpiece, *Moby Dick*, is not easy to say. When he mentioned the project with hopeful enthusiasm to Richard Bentley, he called it a "romance of adventure founded upon certain wild legends of the Southern Sperm Whale Fisheries, and illustrated by the author's own personal experience, of two years or more, as a harpooner." Obviously *Moby Dick* eventually turned into something much more than this, and what it became resulted from several external circumstances that markedly influenced his life at this period. One of the influences undoubtedly was his rereading of Shakespeare: another was his discovery of Thomas Carlyle, whose *Heroes and Hero Worship* and *Sartor Resartus* he combed through with deep interest. A third was the friendship of Nathaniel Hawthorne, whom he met on a vacation jaunt in the Berkshire Hills and other influences might be mentioned as well.

In one of the most interesting but least perceptive criticism of American literature ever concocted, the British writer D.H. Lawrence, who seems to have had absolutely no sense of humor, labeled Melville a man who "hated the world" and whose chief literary importance lay in his predicting the "Doom! Doom! Doom! Of white America. While praising some parts of *Moby Dick* and recognizing elements of greatness in it, Lawrence deplored what he termed sentimentousness and sermonizing in the work. He accused Melville of having a poor style and of being misled by Emersonian morality. Thoroughly anti- American, Lawrence was hardly the person to recognize

and appreciate the rich humor (sometime bawdy) in *Moby Dick* or the brilliant, satirical wit in such tales as *Mardi*.

American critics have themselves occasionally suffered from a similar lapse of judgment. One popular introduction to a modern edition of *Moby Dick* even refers to Melville as a “kind of Gloomy Gus” thus ignoring the comic manner in which much of the story is presented. In almost every one of Melville’s novels from *Typee* to the first part of *Pierre* not the least attractive quality of the style is a bubbling mirth and wit. The humor of such early works as *Typee* and *Omoo* is generally broad, good-natured, and easily appreciated. In *Mardi* the comic elements consist more often in witty philosophical sallies or social and political satire. *Moby Dick* is replete with a type of humor strongly reminiscent of Rabelais and Shakespeare: special emphasis is placed on the comedy of sex.

While Melville was descended on the paternal side from aristocratic forebears, he was a strong believer in the American ideals of liberty and equality. His personal pride in his family background stemmed mainly from the part his two grandfathers had played in freeing the country from British rule and the British class system. Though he often pointed out in his writings ways in which American society fell short of achieving the ideals on which the Constitution was based, he staunchly supported democratic principles. His social criticism, to the extent that it is included within his writings, was directed not against the American system itself but against the evils within human nature.

What makes Melville worthy of a place in the front ranks of the creating word-pictures and his acute and perspicacious observation of life in its true details but, even more, his intense dedication to in-world’s literary masters is not merely his unquestionable talent for intellectual honesty. No American writer was ever more conscientiously honest in depicting the truth as he was it. Such honesty, of course, does not make for popularity. While many best-selling authors are seen to achieve success through intellectual charlatanism, honesty of Melville’s kind seems to require long consideration on the reader’s part and a passage of time before eventual appreciation.

Melville’s development as a writer followed no ordinary pattern. Discovering his literary abilities rather late in the game and almost accidentally, he flowered quickly-not as a “natural” artist who could spin yarns to toil for long, arduous hours to learn his craft. The very rapidity of his artistic development, however, together with his eagerness to experiment, resulted in certain faults or weaknesses in a number of his books-the faults, mainly, of artistic immaturity. Eager to please, he justifiably expected greater acclaim from his public as his techniques improved, but the reverse occurred. Unfortunately Melville was never psychologically attuned to a precise knowledge of what the public wanted: therefore, he was writing at the end of his writing with being a mere entertainer.

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E. Ranjith, M.A., M. Phil., B.Ed., Ph.D. Candidate

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Loyola College-Vetavalam

Thiruvannamalai District-606754

ranjith30@gmail.com