

## UNIT 4

**HERMAN MELVILLE (1819-1891)**

***BARTLEBY, THE SCRIVENER & THE BELL-TOWER***

### **I. INTRODUCTION: BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES.**

Everything in his favor = grandfathers heroes + Melvill family  
solidly established (Boston) & Gansevoorts (Dutch patroon families NY) -->  
childhood in luxury --> 1832 Allan Melville die (madness?) in debt  
--> care of Gansevoorts (uncle Peter)  
2 years, bank --> brother Gansevoort's fur-cap store (Albany) --> 1837,  
Pittsfield, Mass., uncle Thomas Melvill's farm --> taught country school -->  
courses in surveying & engineering --> aftermath of 1837 Panic no work -->  
voyage to/from Liverpool, 1839 --> whaler for South Seas  
1842 Melville & Toby Greene -> Nukahiva (Marquesas) with tribe -->  
Australian whaler --> mutiny & imprisoned by British consul in Tahiti  
--> Nantucket whaler (Eimeo) --> discharged in Lahaina --> Honolulu -->  
frigate United States (seaman) --> August 1, 1844, he dated his life  
*Typee*, 1846 (South Seas) adventure fiction --> great sensation (public &  
critical reviewers) + anthropological --> Gansevoort died (30)  
*Omoo* (Tahiti and Eimeo) --> no suspense, but polished performance Marry  
Elizabeth Knapp Shaw, 1847 (28) --> Lemuel Shaw inheritance --> Manhattan  
(bride, younger brother Allan & bride, mother, 4 sisters & new manuscript) -->  
becoming literary figure of NY (nautical & inland) exploration, and a reliable  
dispenser of vigorous, humorous, authentic tales of exotic adventure.

*Mardi*, 1849 --> Malcolm born --> *Redburn* (Liverpool), 1849 & *White-Jacket* (United States, 1843-44), 1850 --> good reviews England & Amer. *The Whale* (English edition), 1851 --> *Moby Dick* (American edition)

--> slowly written book + dark, "Shakespearean" truths about human nature & universe (two audiences = mob & "eagle-eyed" readers)

Moved to Pittsfield, 1850 --> *Pierre* (account of own literary career) 1853, began writing short stories (*Putnam's & Harper's*) --> 1856, recovered (mental, spiritual & physical agonies) but economic distress Trip Europe & Levant, 1856-57 --> lectured, East & Midwest, 1857-60 Volume of poems & San Francisco --> 1861, economic pressure ease --> moved to Arrowhead, Pittsfield & New York, 1863

*Battle Pieces* --> collection of War poems (quickly forgotten)

Took out frustrations on family --> insane? + financially incompetent  
1867, deputy inspector of customs (NY) --> Malcolm killed himself (18)  
Poem *Clarel*, 1876 (conflict of religious faith & Darwinian skepticism)

Stanwix dies in San Francisco, 1886 + Daughter Bessie died, 1908 + Frances married & lived till 1934 (refusing to talk about her father)

Relax with fellows of imagination --> not among literary men 1870s-80s 1880s  
--> poem unfinished & *Billy Budd, Sailor* (authority/ individuality)

Revival of fame in progress (England) before death, 1891 --> Centennial, 1919 marked revival (lesser writers -> fellow immortals world literature)

## II. MELVILLE'S STORIES: CONSTRUCTION & STYLE

+ than one construction & characters + than familiarly named individuals --> universals (applicable & poignant to all men) --> life not easy nor Melville -->

mysterious process + end-products works of art = mood & compels reader to experience terrors (intensity to climax)

One incident + superposition of narrative perspectives + characterization + historical sources + indirect allusions ==> narrative texture = vision

Bipartite organization of short stories ("diptych") + pairing of episodes + juxtaposition of narrative parts and global conception of stories ??

Problem seen from opposite perspectives --> last & unquestionable truth + realistic humor (1880s) that idealistic romanticism (1st half of XIX) Modernity --> open-ended narrations (& formally incongruous) --> masking & aesthetic distance

Fascination --> formal suspension of critical moments + omniscient narrator + sudden & ironic changes in action + unexplained breaks in narrative structure + symbolic fixation of moral traits

Parables about human annihilation (master/slave, law/individual) ==> manipulation of narrative perspectives + contra position of different parts + maintaining of suspense --> symbolic cues + veiled allusions --> mental play (<--> development of action doesn't lead us far)

Not didactic, moral truths & characters humanly convincing & actions + eccentricities + impulses psychologically credible

Moral conclusions = dramatic representation, not allegory / categorization

Narrative structure seemingly simple & dislocated = cognitive exercise + imaginative process --> metaphysical search & Stories difficult to understand but easy to read --> reader to let go under descriptive charm & imaginative power, without stopping to interpret them

Always irony & allusion + suspense & intrigue lead us forwards + in the end questions left whose origin we do not know

### III. MELVILLE'S WORLD VISION: PAGAN OR CHRISTIAN?

Desire & art to exploit possibilities of situations (invented/second-hand)

'By our own spirits are we deified' (Wordsworth) --> religion & art

'Men without Women' (Hemingway) --> Fatherless outcasts

Problem = innocence, not evil & part Christian, part pagan

Through myth + allegory + symbolism --> dreams of youth

Prose = nouveau riche (verbal splendor) + antiquarian (delight) + bible-echoed

+ allusive + elaborate --> kept faith to the end

Melville rediscovered about 1920 (after 60 years of neglect)

### IV. *BARTLEBY, THE SCRIVENER* (1853)

Published anonymously *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, 1853 (1st magazine) *The*

*Piazza Tales*, 1856 (essays & short stories) --> Curtis: "He has lost his prestige, and I don't believe the Putnam stories will bring it up"

New kind of writing (magazines) --> dull but profitable

3 minds about it --> Turkey + Nippers + Bartleby (prefigures future till 1857, *The Confidence Man*)

Several movements --> mental reactions of lawyer, office, copyists & approach to Bartleby --> 2nd refusals/reactions (<-- conflict) --> 3rd abandonment of scrivener, taking by society, imprisonment (Tombs) & death ==> development of events = spectrum of moral dilemmas

Story of Wall Street + scrivener between walls (white/black) + motionless till expiring --> Melville himself, member of family, all writers? ==> Many

readings = cleaning-woman + Turkey + narrator + "I knew not who" -->

Melville intends a resolution

Ill comprehended + deeply introspective + comedy of office life (own experience) --> employer/employee, public/private self, ego/superego

"Bartleby" = projection of future which threatened Melville = literary conscience (deputy inspector of customs, prisoner in city, writer preferred not to, ex-clerk of the Dead Letter Office of Literature)

Parable of all writers who refuse to write (<--> Turkey & Nippers)

Narrator = 'those yes-gentry' <--> Bartleby (=Hawthorne), says 'No!' Narrator = fulfills Christ's judgment on righteous (food/drink, office, home, visits) + acts grudgingly & smugly --> believes only in prudence

<--> saintly passivity of an apostle of utter abnegation (Bartleby)

Far from 'a man of peace' --> victim of innate & incurable disorder = self-approval -> irritation + reconciled to Bartleby -> 'spasmodic passions' + feeling pity -> repulsion => 'some mysterious purpose of all wise Providence' -> gossip hardens his heart (flees responsibility)

When he hears of Bartleby's arrest, almost approves; yet on the same day visits him in prison, even tips the grub-man, but ignores him again until it is too late.

Christ-like vocabulary (nothing ascertainable, except original sources)

Bartleby = 'man of peace' -> Hindu ascetic (gentle, firm, utterly passive)

In a city of the dead -> 'Bartleby makes his home' --> Comedy on surface & metaphysical depths (doppelgänger, shadow, appointed 'other') Bartleby appears from nowhere (no identity, only a copyist) --> Death-in-Life & Life-in-Death --> borderline living/dead blurred

Within white (Nippers) & black (Turkey) --> Bartleby's eyes gray.

After this blurring of guide-lines --> we are roped one to another

Wall Street lawyer's office = ship's crew (Hell with glimpse of Heaven)

## V. *THE BELL-TOWER* (1855)

Art creates & kills --> from animate to inanimate is but a step

Fatherless, 'cynic solitaire', glorying in self-esteem, sole taskmaster Creative intellect destructive = 'practical materialist' -> self-destructive Bannadonna (violent & killer) is killed

Literature of literature (Hawthorne's "Ethan Brand" + *The Faerie Queene* + *Old Testament*) = overlaying of ideas, images, meanings, references

Overelaborated + language stilted + allegorical intentions too explicit ==> absolute, Shakespearean fusion

Weakness = precision of 5 formulas inadequate for multiple/conflicting center --> 'true artist' & 'the great mechanician' --> artist killed by own creation ==> personal image, symbol for age of science

Private core of experience + mysterious sexual echoes + obscure Spenserian allusions = scorn we are meant to feel --> metaphysics behind loathing --> for materialists of his age, 'machinery' as 'miracle'

Casual properties of gothic horror (controlling environment) --> machines compete with men, pressing religious implications

Older humanism (of man 'infinite in faculty') --> new 'humanism' suicidal  
'Like negroes, these powers own man sullenly'