GUILT, SACRIFICE AND REDEMPTION IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S MOBY-DICK, PIERRE *AND* BILLY BUDD

Cristina Denisa ARSENE-ONU
University of Piteşti

Abstract: *In what Herman Melville is concerned, we consider meaningful information that he had been raised in the Calvinistic Dutch Reformed Church in upstate New York, and his works, especially* Moby-Dick, Pierre, *and* Billy Budd, *are filled with the rhetoric of Calvinism. Thus, we propose ourselves to approach these novels from a religious and also a stylistic point of view, stressing their religious themes, symbols and literary metaphors.*

Key words: *religion, sacrifice, guilt.*

Herman Melville was little known during his lifetime and he became famous after a century had passed from his birth. He had the misfortune to live during the most peaceful of all the civilized centuries, but "to think in terms of Armageddon, conceiving the world as a man-of-war" (CARPENTER, 1955:73). Melville is also considered by the same Carpenter as a nineteenth-century American prophet. Born a century too soon, Melville truly prophesied the future. He was a **prophet**, not only in that he foretold the future, but also in that he proclaimed the inner reality of things. He possessed the myth-making imagination: all life became an allegory whose meaning obsessed him. (Ibid., 73) (in one of his prophetic moments he even anticipated atomic fission, describing the tail of the whale as if it were cyclotron –LEVIN, 1956: 35)

Melville and Calvinism

Raised in the Dutch Calvinism of his mother's family Melville was well-versed in one of the major Protestant denominations of the period, especially throughout New York State. *Moby-Dick* itself explores the limits of such fundamental Calvinist doctrines as the innate depravity of man, free will, determinism, and the limits of knowledge and self-knowledge especially.

Calvin's doctrines were fundamental tenets to the young Herman, who was reared in his mother's conservative Dutch Reformed Church instead of his father's liberal Unitarianism. However, Melville's own children were brought up in his wife's Unitarian Church, which he joined later, around the time he began *Billy Budd.* But even though Melville repudiated Calvinism, its strong effect on him is seen in his lifelong attacks, overt and covert, on church dogma, religiosity and hypocrisy. It is evident too in his fascination with Hawthorne's themes of secret guilt, sin and heresy. The "great power of blackness" that Melville found so fascinating in Hawthorne's fiction emerged in *Moby-Dick,* where Ahab's vision of evil gives the book profundity as a counterforce to the lighter, more genial irony of many chapters. (YANNELLA, 2002:62) Unlike Hawthorne, Melville did believe in personal belief. At Melville's death (1891) in his native New York, Elizabeth Melville found no buyers for her husband's vast collection of theology (KAZIN, 1997:14).

Melville's Work – an Interdisciplinary Approach - Religion and Literature

Throughout his career, Melville has regularly assumed a metacritical role of guiding and challenging readers' responses to his works by foregrounding issues of interpretation. His numerous efforts to complicate the reading process are mostly done

BDD-A5714 © 2009 Universitatea din Piteşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:08 UTC)

with the intention of helping readers to become better readers of his texts. (LEVINE ed., 1998: 3)

Melville has proved clairvoyant on many of the critical concerns that would come to engage twentieth-century theorists. Consider just a few of the theoretical dimensions and implications of *Moby-Dick*. Representations of Ishmael's various interactions with Queequeq anticipate twentieth-century interrogations of gender, sexuality, race, and nation; "Cetology" points in Thomas Kuhnian and Foucauldian ways to the relation of interpretive paradigms to cultural meanings; "The Whiteness of the Whale" and "The Doubloon" chapters anticipate Derridean deconstruction and developments in neopragamatism (Ibid., 4) and the various biblical allusions in his books anticipate also religion and literature studies.

Literature and religion are natural partners in the American literature. The Bible, the seminal book of American culture, has, on the one hand, been the most influential text in the development of the art of literary criticism and, on the other hand, been interpreted apart from other literature in the past two centuries in the field of literary studies known as "biblical criticism." As a result, the Bible is rarely studied in literary courses. However, since the beginning of the nineteenth century there has been a stream of influential writers, critics, and scholars who have continued to reflect on the interaction between literature and religion. Religious experience and reflection have always engendered poetry and literature, prompting the imagination and moving beyond speculative thought (DETWEILER, JASPER, eds., 2000: ix-xi).

In our paper we have generally limited ourselves to the American literary-religious tradition, emphasizing the influence of Christianity and Judaism on Melville's work. In no sense is our work intended to be confessional. Although we emphasize the Bible as probably the single important literary influence on American culture, we do not do so from any doctrinal or dogmatic position (Ibid., xiii).

Following this interdisciplinary approach we intend to demonstrate the importance of literary readings of the Bible, emphasize the still pervasive influence of the Bible on American culture. Thus, our approach to literature and religion here might best be described as hermeneutic or interpretative.

Biblical Themes in Melville's Fiction

Melville was steeped in the Bible and biblical allusions abound in *Moby-Dick.* Nathalia Wright says in "Biblical Allusion in Melville's Prose," American Literature, XII (July, 1940), 198: "Biblical allusion in Melville's pages appears as his chief method of creating an extensive background for his narratives. It magnifies his characters and themes . . . so that they appear larger and more significant than life. It suggests the existence of a world beyond the world of sense, which exerts influence upon this world, and in which ultimate truth resides. Above all, it helps establish a background of antiquity for his sequence of events, thus investing them with a certain timeless quality.")

In *Moby-Dick* we make acquaintance with the sea men's theme of the Leviathan, and implicitly with the biblical story of Jonah. Father Maple employs the language of sea-faring men as he explains the message of the Old Testament fable, discussing Jonah's perverse disobedience of God. The sermon admirably foreshadows Ahab – who, like Jonah, stubbornly disobeys the will of God; though unlike Jonah, he does not seek refuge in a hiding place but openly defies God and points a warning of the consequences of disobedience (HILLWAY, 1969:94-95). The sermon serves also as a warning to the doomed sailors of the *Pequod* that Providence must be obeyed in all things and that individual destiny is predetermined. Captain Ahab's destiny is "fated,"

BDD-A5714 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:08 UTC)

just as in *Billy Budd* (1924) the hapless young sailor is condemned by Captain Vere's peremptory judgment: "Fated boy . . . , what have you done!" (MELVILLE, *Billy Budd*, 99). Calvinism is everywhere and unavoidable in Melville's writings.

The Use of the Sermon in Melville's *Moby-Dick*

One can mention, as another relevant point in our endeavor to present and analyze the interrelationship between religion/theology and Melville's fiction, an example of sermon, not as preached in church or chapel, but in the pages of *Moby-Dick.*

For instance, Father Mapple's sermon is set within one of the greatest of all fictional accounts of the symbolic conflict between man and his fate. Melville's Captain Ahab declares that "all visible objects are but as pasteboard masks," and his allegory relentlessly explores concepts of good and evil in the pursuit of the great white whale. Father Mapple's sermon is rooted in the great maritime story of the biblical Jonah and his encounter with an ancestor of Moby Dick – a story of God's pursuit, preaching, and salvation. The language of the sermon, with its address to Mapple's "shipmates," links the Bible with myths and the immediate experience of the seafolk of New Bedford, literature drawing all together in a seamless web of poetry that ends with the question, full of biblical resonances: "for what is man that he should live out the lifetime of his God?"

Father Mapple's entrance to the whaleman's chapel is likewise out of the teeth of a howling gale. Once inside, he mounts to a pulpit shaped in "the likeness of a ship's bluff bows," a vantage point from which "the God of breezes fair or foul is first invoked for favorable winds". As Ishmael's spiritual pilot, Father Mapple peers into "the storm of God's quick wrath" that lies ahead, then lingers, not over a dictionary entry, but over the Bible as the inspired word of God. Drawing his finger down its opened page, he places it at the beginning verses of the book of Jonah, then begins his stormy sermon on the reluctant prophet whose journey foreshadows Ishmael's, further extending the significance of the aspirate "H." Jonah fled from his appointed task of delivering the word of God by boarding a ship, only to find himself tempest-tossed by an angry wind, and then, after drawing his fateful lot, being cast overboard into the raging sea where he is swallowed by a whale, whereupon the tumultuous seas grow calm. For Jonah, the word of God, his inspiration as a recalcitrant prophet, came as an insistent word in the form of a gale and a whale, until he accepts his appointed task to preach the word of repentance that had been delivered to him. Just so does Father Mapple as a pilot of the living God exhort his congregation to repent: "Sin not; but if you do, take heed to repent of it like Jonah". And so too Ishmael, who will sin in committing himself to Ahab's Quarter Deck oath ["I, Ishmael, was one of that crew"], but later repent and cleanse himself in the balm of the spermacetti ["I forgot all about our horrible oath; in that inexpressible sperm, I washed my hands and my heart of it"]. The other strand in Father Mapple's two-stranded sermon, "To preach the Truth to the face of Falsehood!", weighs upon Ishmael as well as Jonah. This involves Ishmael's attempt to construct an accurate and comprehensive exposition of the whale, even while acknowledging that absolute truth is unattainable.

***Moby-Dick* as Sacred Text**

According to Lawrence Buell, in certain ways *Moby-Dick* is a sort of scripture. It is, to begin with, indisputably one of the works of the American literary "canon," as scholars like to call it, read and taught by the professorial priesthood. This particular fish story becomes ultimately in some sense a record of an encounter with the divine. The book's language is drenched in sacramentalism, "brimming over with signals of the transcendent." When the white whale rises out of the water on the first day of the chase, it does not merely

BDD-A5714 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:08 UTC)

breach: “the grand god revealed himself”. Here and at innumerable other points metaphor seems to convert story into myth (Buell, in Richard H. Brodhead, ed., 1986:53).

One of the major intellectual forces behind the whole so-called American literary renaissance to which Melville’s work contributed was a religious ferment and anxiety resulting from the breakdown of consensual dogmatic structures and particularly the breakdown of biblical authority in Protestant America. This had both “negative” and “positive” aspects. Negatively, the rise of the “higher criticism” in biblical studies, which began to make significant incursions in America during the decade of Melville’s birth, seemed threatening and destructive in its approach to the Bible (and, by extension, to institutionalized Christianity as a whole) as a culture-bound, historical artifact subject to the same methods of interpretation and susceptible to the same errors and obsolescence as any other ancient artifact. This threatened to reduce holy scripture to myth in the bad sense - to quaint superstitious fabrication (Ibid., 55).

Concomitantly, however, a less parochial and more creative understanding of the religious imagination now became possible, an affirmative reading of myth as the expression of spiritual archetypes informing not only the Bible but the scriptures of all cultures, and not only ancient texts but - at least potentially - the literature of one’s own day as well. (Ibid., 56) Melville appropriated for symbolic purposes the imagery and vocabularies of all major and selected “primitive” world religions. In *Moby-Dick* we see something like a full literary efflorescence, well ahead of its progress as a field of academic inquiry, which blossomed only in the late nineteenth century (Ibid., 58).

Although we never lose sight of the fact that Moby Dick is simply a large albino sperm whale, it is, from the start, the *idea* of the great whale that compels us as it compels Ishmael. . . . We see the whale through a veil of rumor, scholarship, legend, and myth; by imperceptible degrees we come to acquiesce in the appropriateness of such things, and we eventually find ourselves regarding the whale as something more than a whale (Ibid., 59).

The organising theme of *Moby-Dick* is the hunt by Captain Ahab after the great white whale which had dismembered him of his leg; of the final destruction of himself and his ship by its savage onslaught. On the white hump of the ancient and vindictive monster Captain Ahab piles the sum of all the rage and hate of mankind from the days of Eden down.

Ishmael begins his fatal voyage aboard the Pequod on December 25; and there is a fitting irony in the fact that on the day that celebrates the birth of the Saviour of mankind, the Pequod should sail forth to slay Moby-Dick, the monstrous symbol and embodiment of unconquerable evil (Ibid., 131).

At the beginning of *Moby-Dick*, Melville culls from the most incongruous volumes an anthology of comments upon Leviathan, beginning with the Mosaic comment “And God created great whales,” and ending, after eclectic quotations from Pliny, Lucian, Rabelais, Sir Thomas Browne, Spenser, Hobbes, Bunyan, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Paley, Blackstone, Hawthorne, Daniel Webster, Darwin, and dozens of others (including an excerpt “From ‘Something’ Unpublished”) ends on the old whale song: “Oh, the rare old whale, mid storm and gale In his ocean home will be A giant in might, where might is right, And King of the boundless sea” (Ibid., 134).

Ahab cannot find faith or balance. But Ishmael can. Ishmael knows the transcendental problem. He begins in crisis, seeing death and the blackness of darkness everywhere. Faith, like a jackal, gnaws at hope. But his deepest fear is not death; he fears that there is nothing beyond our shell of existence; there is no ideal reality beyond the material; there is nothing (LEVINE, 1998: 71).

Ahab’s approach to the problem of nothingness is denial. In “The Quarter-Deck”, he rallies the crew by playing fast and loose with transcendental ideas, making

BDD-A5714 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:08 UTC)

the whale out to be a "pasteboard mask" or symbol of an evil and yet reasoning force. Thus, to approach transcendence, we must create symbols. Ahab's double heresy, however, is that he attempts to transcend by breaking through and reducing symbols (the whale's pasteboard mask), and does so assuming that deconstruction, not creativity is the universal ideal. He is an atheist in denial (Ibid., 74).

Evidence of Ahab's being a projection of Ishmael occurs when we find Ahab mimicking ideas and images that Ishmael has already voiced. Ishmael, in chapter 42, as a symbol maker, celebrates the "godly gamesomeness" we enjoy in building symbols and playing with meaning. But in analyzing the symbol of whiteness, Ishmael destroys the very foundations of symbolism itself and undoes the only means he has (i.e. his creativity) of counteracting his fear of nothingness. Rather than making whiteness into an easy allegory of death, he discovers an "absence of color," and from that absence he leaps into the vacuum: "a colorless, all-color of atheism." As a symbol of nothingness, whiteness symbolizes paradoxically that symbols do not exist (Ibid., 75).

In following the logic of Melville's symbols, readers are encouraged to tie meanings together for themselves, made- to read creatively. We hug others, we love them, we attach ourselves to them. But to hug is to grab and take and possess: we enslave. Melville has us dig for, all the more to show us the human necessities of certain ideologies. Thus, readers experience in their reading why Ishmael choose freedom and love; why Ahab demands control.

In "Ahab's Leg", the captain suffers a painful blow to the groin when his whalebone pegleg snaps under his weight. The pain, Ishmael says, is "the direct issue of a former woe". In dancing around this delicate fact, Ishmael finally intimates that more of Ahab is missing than his leg, and part of the verbal dance that he reports happening in Ahab's mind is an intricate argument concerning castration, ontology, and genealogy, it is essentially this: Ahab's "heart-woe" is connected genealogically to "the sourceless primogenitures of the gods." That is, there is a tragic, "sourceless" source that pre-exists even God. If this is so, then "the gods themselves are not for ever glad," and the "heart-woe" pain descends to us collaterally beside God's. We are not children of God; we are cousins related to *one* grandparent, Grief (Ibid., 78).

He has set up God as an unknowing, father-figure version of himself. In defying God, he manages to ignore the fact that "the unsuffusing" mother-like "thing" beyond us all - being itself - is also an impersonal symbol of our own devising, just a rhetorical trope. Ahab is defiant and worshipful ("defyingly I worship thee!") (Ibid., 79)

***Pierre* – A Christian Allegory**

As a descendant of the Puritans and the grandson of a Revolutionary War hero, young Pierre grows up secured in the enclosed sacred garden of the family estate of Saddle Meadows. Through the civil leadership of Pierre's mother, Mary Glendinning, and the religious guidance of the pastor Reverend Falsgrave, the Calvinist legacy of duty, sanctity, and submission to authority is preserved. Surrounded by symbols of his national and religious heritage, Pierre feels that life is to be a text written by others, an "illuminated scroll," a "sweetly-writ manuscript" (ELLIOTT, in Bercovitch & Jehlen, eds., 1987: 341) that ordained for him a course of comfort and docility. Recalling a pattern of generational decline precedented in the Old Testament, however, the narrator wonders if "that blessing pass from him as did the divine blessing from the Hebrews". Not surprisingly, then, just as the third generation Hebrews backslid from their faith, so Pierre becomes a rebellious youth. The change, which has strong religious overtones, comes with two events: a revelation of a purported secret sin on the part of his father; and Pierre's dedication of his life to right the wrong. After Isabel asserts her identity as

BDD-A5714 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:08 UTC)

Pierre's sister and persuades Pierre that his father was a sinner, Pierre is set on a course of rebellion that leads to his destruction.

One of Pierre's first expressions of his unrest is in a theological conflict between himself on one side and his mother and pastor on the other, involving scriptural interpretation. When Mary Glendinning is deciding whether she should allow her servant Delly and Delly's illegitimate child to remain on her estate, Mrs. Glendinning resorts, as did the early Puritans and the Whig preachers of the Revolution, to the Old Testament to buttress her wrathful judgment against the sinner. To support her opinion that "no such profligate should pollute this place" and that the child shall be cast out with the mother, Mary turns to her minister: "Reverend sir, what are the words of the Bible?" Because he favors New Testament charity over Mary's harsh justice, Falsgrave reluctantly answers, "The sins of the father shall be visited upon the children of the third generation". On the issue of Delly's child, this text has powerful meaning for Pierre, who now thinks of himself as bearing the burden of his father's sin. Opposing his mother on this issue, Pierre proposes that true Christian love and charity dictate mercy. When mother and son press their clergyman to resolve the debate, Falsgrave, who fears offending his patroness, equivocates that "millions of circumstances modify all moral questions" .As the pastor evades the issue, the narrator reveals an "exquisitely cut cameo, (Ibid., 342) representing the allegorical union of the serpent and dove" that Mr. Falsgrave wears beneath his surplice, symbolizing for the reader the minister's readiness to compromise his Christian principles for self interest. Pierre's perception of this hypocrisy and his inability to accept the moral complexity behind the symbol deepen his personal self-doubt and heighten his anxiety. From the outset Pierre's psychic conflict within himself and his relationships with others are intertwined with his inherited religious beliefs, which form the foundations of his cultural ideology and deeply affect his understanding of himself and of others.

For Pierre the interweaving of history and religious imagery transforms the brutal and comic details of his family heritage into a romanticized tale, which distorts his view of reality, creates his sense of inadequacy and guilt, and leads to his extreme form of disillusionment and rebellion. *Pierre* includes many of the themes that feminist scholars have identified with women's novels at mid-century. First, and most obviously, house and home are significant domains in the book. Scenes in *Pierre* take place in the Glendinning mansion's bedroom, dining room, and private closet. The Glendinning house embodies the family's pride of place.

In its portrayal of women, *Pierre* also draws on popular stereotypes from women's fiction, such as the domestic angel, the dark temptress, the busy-body, the proud matriarch, the abandoned woman, and even the prostitute (Wyn Kelley, in Levine, ed., 1998: 95). Mary Glendinning works as hard as any domestic angel to raise Pierre as a gentleman, a Christian, and a conscientious lord of his tenants. "Never rave, Pierre; and never rant. Your father never did either…". Pierre and his mother sustain a private cult, founded on worship of the absent father, love for the "lovely, immaculate" mother, and obedience.

Melville shows both the Glendinning mansion and Lucy's cottage as shrines to religious domesticity, the women as saints and angels, and Pierre as the Christian knight sworn in fealty to domestic goddesses (Ibid., 100).

Pierre flees the domestic religion of his ancestors, choosing Isabel's radical, vital domesticness instead. Pierre and Isabel flee the country hoping to find new lives in the city. But in New York, Melville draws on urban literature describing the evil of the city – poverty, prostitution, drunkenness, and ruin. Pierre, Isabel and Delly settle in a

BDD-A5714 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:08 UTC)

tenement, the renovated church known as the Apostles. Instead of a time-honored family mansion, he occupies a former church carved up into flats by speculators.

Pierre begins to doubt his actions and to feel he may have chosen unwisely to defend Isabel's honor and to write a metaphysical novel. In the brotherhood of the Apostles, Pierre is inspired to write this different kind of work, an attempt to "show them the deeper secrets than the Apocalypse!" (Ibid., 103-108).

Melville uses the imagery of religious worship to show that in a corrupt materialist culture, Pierre's new domestic arrangements are just as much a fiction as the old. In Saddle Meadows, the Christian gentleman-knight worships the saint-mother and angel-wife with elaborate adoration. The Apostles, named after Christ brotherhood of followers, also has religious resonances. Melville may certainly have been aware of the common cultural associations between Catholic orders of monks or nuns and stories of Gothic licentiousness. The picture of Pierre, bundled up in blankets with hot bricks tucked around him, presents an ironic inversion of the sacred ideal.

The gothic family melodrama bursts into a murderous climax when Pierre kills his enemies Glen Stanly and Frederic Tartan and ends in the last of his cells, the prison. He has sought to escape the sins of his demonic father and grandfather by resisting male authority and by locating his revolt in the home, creating an explicitly nonpatriarchal household.

Exhausted by his writing labors, frustrated that he must sacrifice Lucy all over again, he finally asks the key question: "How did he know that Isabel was his sister?" But it is too late for him to repair the damage and for Melville to produce the conventional happy ending. Rather than wedding bells, Pierre finds the dark dungeon. When he stands in his physical cell at the end, Pierre can still only see his life in terms of salvation versus damnation, good versus evil, heaven versus hell, docile acceptance versus defiant rejection: "Had I been heartless now, disowned, and spurningly portioned off the girl in Saddle Meadows, then had I been happy through a long life on earth, and perchance through a long eternity in heaven! Now, 'tis merely hell in both worlds. Well, be it hell. I will mold a trumpet of the flames, and with my breath of flame, breathe back my defiance!" (p. 360). But instead of the heavenly silken sash of his grandfather to shield him in death, Pierre perishes in his prison covered with the earthly "ebon vines" of Isabel's hair (ELLIOTT, in Bercovitch and Jehlen eds., 1987: 348).

Pierre boldly attacks the perversions of domesticity from within. The failure of brotherhood, Christ's own alternative to marriage, indicts the false gods and goddesses of Melville's readers.

The book reveals the fault lines in American family, in patterns of incest, abuse, betrayal, and the hypocrisy and silence that surround them. The religion of the American family, Melville implies, demands the worship of false idols.

***Billy Budd* – A Christian Ideal**

As the story opens, Billy Budd–'the natural democrat–'is serving on a merchant ship: the Rights of Man. But England is at war, and on the voyage home the Rights of Man is stopped by the warship Indomitable, and Billy Budd is trans-shipped. On the Indomitable, Billy serves under an evil mate, who unjustly attacks him. In instinctive self-defense, Billy kills the mate. But because the deed occurs on the warship of a country at war, the just Captain Vere condemns Billy to death under martial law, even while recognizing his essential innocence. And Billy accepts the justice of the sentence, exclaiming before his execution: "God bless Captain Vere!" Thus the story describes the military execution of the good man, who has previously been deprived of his civil rights without his own consent (CARPENTER, 1955: 79). –'Unlike *Moby Dick*

BDD-A5714 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:08 UTC)

where the crew voluntarily abdicated their rights, and where they voluntarily embraced an evil purpose, *Billy Budd* justifies the arbitrary execution of the truly good man: "martial law must prevail."

Captain Vere carefully analyzes the case: Billy is "innocent before God" and "Nature." "'But do these buttons that we wear attest that our allegiance is to Nature? No, to the King . . . We fight at command. . . Not so much ourselves, as martial law operating through us'" condemns Billy. And "'*for that law and the rigour of it, we are not responsible*.'" Where *Moby Dick* describes the inevitable operation of natural law, *Billy Budd* describes the human operation of martial law.

Many have recognized the centrality of sacrifice in *Billy Budd*, but we have yet to appreciate the full historical significance of Melville's portrayal. In *Moby-Dick*, sacrifice is a form of spiritual economy, motivating all members – workers and owners alike – of a developing capitalist industry. By 1891, the year of *Billy Budd's* printing, sacrifice has come to achieve plural and modern meanings, standing for a ritual common to all cultures (Hebrew, Greek, Roman, Christian, Indian, and Chinese).

The novella's opening image of the black sailor at Liverpool, who fades like a superimposed movie still into "the Handsome Sailor," "the welkin-eyed Billy Budd," establishes the dramatic historical exchange enacted in the story. Thus, from the very beginning one can decipher and advance/forward the following themes developed in the novella: submission and spirituality, kinship and class, sacrifice and social control. The black sailor is an ideal type and a sacred object, unifying a vast variety of "tribes and complexions." As a counterpart to this African focal personage, Billy Budd will be a model for the working class (MIZRUCHI, 1998: 89).

The sailor's purity is emphasized. His colour is singularly "intense," his blood "unadulterated," his body "symmetric," his teeth genuinely "white": to be sacred, the passage implies, is to be an anomaly. The sailor creates a break, a disruption of conventional routine. He strengthens social order by bringing it down. This character, the worthiest of all, is threatening, which is why he is the victim of the closing sacrificial image.

Sacrifice is a ritual about control, a symbolic stage for the conciliation of superhuman powers. But according to Melville's novella, sacrifice has equally to do with the mundane and human. The Black sailor inspires a series of sacrificial recollections, extending back to the early Semites, somewhat further back as the martyred acts featured in the world history.

Billy Budd dramatizes a prevailing habit of Melville's culture: the habit of thinking back to sacrifice. It helps us to understand the urge to regain the rite that fired so many theological, social, scientific, and literary minds in this period (Ibid., 91).

Sacrifice, for Melville, is most authentic in its ancient form, where it expresses profound religious uncertainty (Does God really perceive our smoky oblations/religious offerings?). His sense of the rite is closest to that of the ancient Semites who saw belief as a dilemma and worried about the preservation of boundaries. This is in contrast to a Christian ideal, where sacrifice is a divine office and the ultimate testament of faith, subordinate to an ideal of messianic Christianity. In a reverential departure from both the Hebraic and Christian plots, Melville rewrites the story of the Fall for the modern age.

This work, like others, betrays Melville's acquaintance with the theological disputes of his era: debates on Christ's character (his sweetness versus his duplicity, his transcendent versus his cultural dimensions), on evidence and miracles, on the

BDD-A5714 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:08 UTC)

consequences of Christianity's triumph. Melville's understanding of religion was shaped by a spiritualized sense of social necessity (Ibid., 92).

Sacrifice is acknowledged as common to all religions, but is narrowed to its truest divine form in the Crucifixion. More compatible with Melville's own scepticism, though he disavowed them, were rational approaches to the New and Old Testaments. The application of scientific method to narratives of faith may have irritated Melville, but it struck him so forcefully that it was eventually incorporated into his meditations on religion in *Billy Budd.* Melville's America was uniquely receptive to sacrifice, and this novella in particular can help us to understand why.

In light of the above, we consider that American history and culture, right from its beginnings, imprinted a valuable religious characteristic on its nation and consequently, on its fiction. Thus, our conclusion in connection with American literature as a whole and with the works of Herman Melville, in particular, is that they developed as original literature by enriching the American fictional world with a great variety of religious themes.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bercovitch, S., Myra J., eds., *Ideology and Classic American Literature,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987.

Brodhead, R. H., ed., *New Essays on Moby-Dick,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986.

Carpenter, F. I., *American Literature and the Dream*, Philosophical Library, New York, 1955.

Carroll, P. N., *Puritanism and the Wilderness: The Intellectual Significance of the New England Frontier, 1629-1700*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1969.

Detweiler, R., Jasper, D., eds., *Religion and Literature. A Reader*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 2000.

Hillway, T., *Herman Melville*, College & University Press Publishers, 1963.

Kazin, A., *God and the American Writer*, Vintage Books A Division of Random House, Inc., New York, 1997.

Levin, H., *Symbolism and Fiction,* The University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 1956.

Levine, R. S., ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge,1998.

Melville, H., *Pierre, Israel Potter, The Piazza Tales, The Confidence-Man, Tales, Billy Budd*, Library of America, 1985.

Melville, H., *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago,1962.

Melville, H., *Moby Dick*, Norton, New York, 1967.

Mizruchi, S. L., *The Science of Sacrifice. American Literature and Modern Social Theory.* Princeton, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1998.

Wright, N., "*Biblical Allusion in Melville's Prose*," American Literature, XII (July, 1940), 198

Yannella, D., ed., *New Essays on Billy Budd,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002.

BDD-A5714 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 13:00:08 UTC)