WOMEN IN MELVILLE'S SHORTER FICTION

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All Melville's books about the sea have the one anomaly and defect of the sea from the central, human point of view: one half of the race, woman, is left out of it…
(Lewis Mumford, "Amor Threatening")[1]

Abstract

The paper deals with Melville's shorter fiction, both published and unpublished--the Agatha story, "The Paradise of Bachelors," and "The Tartarus of Maids,"--in an attempt to ascertain the novelist's attitude towards women.

Keywords: shorter fiction, women, attitude, symbolics, exclusion, discrimination

Although *Typee*, *Omoo, Mardi* and especially *Pierre* represent Melville's most impressive attempt at addressing the plight of women, his shorter pieces are by no means less important in point. For more than a year (1852-53), the novelist worked on a story whose main character is a woman—"The Agatha Story." It is based on a real life event that Melville learned from a New Bedford lawyer while the two of them were discussing "the great patience, and endurance and resignedness of the women of the island in submitting so uncomplainingly to the long, long absences of their sailor husbands".[2] Agatha is a young woman whose only companion is her father; they live in total isolation at the lighthouse where her father works. One day a shipwreck occurs and one sailor is saved: Robinson Charity. The latter needs some time to recover and is heartily attended by Agatha; soon, the inevitable happens: Agatha and Robinson fall in love. Although she anticipates the suffering in store for her if they marry, love gains the upper hand. Barely married, Robinson leaves his wife alone to look for a job. Agatha's tragedy is already begun. She will only get news from her husband seventeen years later; Robinson has found not only a new job but has married another woman too, in another harbor. Melville obviously treats this male character as a weakling, a man who cannot help giving in to temptation; on the contrary, Agatha receives the novelist's entire sympathy.

It is true, despite working for about a year at the manuscript, Melville never completed the story. Unsure of his art, the novelist asked his friend Hawthorne to write Agatha's account. Irritated by his friend's enthusiastic pestering, Hawthorne refused.

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Convinced that Agatha's story could not be left untold, Melville decided to do the job himself.[3]

If "The Story of Agatha" never got into print, another story dealing with women's lot did: "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids." This is the only short story in a diptych form that directly addresses women's exploitation and exclusion.[4]

Both parts of the diptych, "The Paradise of Bachelors," and "The Tartarus of Maids," deal with working people. Nonetheless, differences are enormous and not restricted to sex (in the first part the protagonists are all men, in the second mostly women); their types of work as well as their lifestyles are complete opposites.

In the first part the reader is introduced to the paradise of bachelors, seen as a tranquil, monastic, comfortable, with mildly soporific effects on the visitor, situated in the very heart of London. The place is described as a veritable oasis of the latter-day Templars' cloisters. Formerly the Templars were rough knights. Now they are affable lawyers, and their Temple is a bachelors' refuge, a pleasant place to be invited for dinner. The narrator's host is R. F. C. In all, nine bachelors attend this merry banquet which boasts a great variety of food—oxtail soup, claret, turbot, sherry, roast beef, ale, tarts, puddings—all supervised by a headwaiter with a head like that of Socrates. The nine latter-day Templars are characterized by "having warm hearts and warmer welcomes, full minds and fuller cellars, and giving good advice and glorious dinners, spiced with rare divertissements of fun and fancy" (1259).[5]

The entire atmosphere surrounding the narrator "was the very perfection of quiet absorption of good living, good drinking, good feeling, and good talk" (1264), conveying a deep sense of brotherhood. Most of the guests are great travelers for no obligations keep them in one place; they relate pleasant stories, calmly drink and smoke, and seem to know nothing of pain and trouble, two items that they dismiss as "nonsense." The narrator is therefore justified in exclaiming: "Sir, this is the very Paradise of Bachelors!" (1265)

The second part of the story, "The Tartarus of Maids," contrasts sharply with the first. The setting has moved from the City of London to a wild, somber, mountainous scenery, isolated from civilization. Moreover, it is wintertime and the snow covers everything, blinding the frostbitten narrator in his way to a paper mill. The names of places are significant: Woedolor Mountain, Mad Maid's Bellows'-pipe, Black Notch, Devil's Dungeon, Blood River, suggesting physical and psychic suffering. When the paper mill building appears in sight it looks "white-washed … like some great white sepulcher" (1266), with a clear hint at the fate of those working inside. Considering the silence and isolation of the place, the narrator sees it as "the very counterpart of the Paradise of Bachelors, but snowed upon, and frost-painted to a sepulcher" (1269).

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As regards the female workers of this mill, they are unmarried and forced to remain so—marrying means losing their job—and their situation is in sharp contrast with that of the merry bachelors of the Temple. Their pale, exhausted faces are blue with cold, giving a general impression of suffering. They are seated "at rows of blank-looking counters … with blank white folders in their hands, all blankly folding blank paper" (1270).

Instead of getting help from the machines, the girls are slaves to the "iron animals": "Machinery—that vaunted slave of humanity—here stood menially served by human beings, who served mutely and cringingly as the slave serves the Sultan. The girls … seem … as mere cogs to the wheels" (1271). The consequences of this type of work are dire: many women get tuberculosis and die.

The life of these workers is of little value to their boss, "Old Bach", a dark and grim person, as well as to Cupid, the officious youngster that accompanies the narrator in his visit. The latter, in contrast with the girls, is "red-cheeked, spirited looking" (1272) and possesses the strange innocence of a hardened heart which makes him see the girls as if they were machines.

If one compares the "Paradise of Bachelors" with "The Tartarus of Maids", one realizes the artificial, sterile character of the former since its bliss is only obtained at the cost of rejecting responsibility, social and familial; nice food, wine, snuff and sparkling conversation are their palliative alternatives to commitment to solving social or political evil, to raising a family or struggling in the service of something higher than their individual existence. If they are bachelors, the protagonists of the former account are so by their own device; the maids of the latter account, on the other hand, are forced to remain single for fear of losing their jobs. They are denied not only the right the right enjoy their sexuality, to have a family, to make children but they are robbed of their most precious asset—health—inexorably lost in the mechanistic routine of every-day labor. If in *Pierre* Melville examines the condition of women irrespective of class, in the diptych "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" he focuses on the status of women belonging to the lowest classes in patriarchal society. As Nancy Fredricks puts it,

> Setting the story in a paper factory serves to emphasize representation's complicity in women's exploitation. The "blank looking girls, with blank white folders in their hands, all blankly folding blank paper" must surrender their reproductive power (the factory will only employ "maids") in the production of paper that the wealthy bachelors will inscribe with the language of money. The diptych structure here means that the extravagant lifestyle of the lawyer bachelors is linked—even depends upon—the deprivation of the oppressed maids at work in the paper factory. (118)

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It is now obvious that the Melvillean quester is not blind to the suffering of humankind; his sympathy goes to the anonymous, the silent, the marginalized, the forgotten, the misrepresented—women included. As Jane Mushabac suggests, "Melville had always been profoundly attuned to the condition of slavery implicit in the human condition; it was only a matter of time before he noticed that women as well as men were slaves.[6]

It would be a mistake, nonetheless, to restrict our analysis to feminine characters in Melville's work. At least as important are feminine features to be found in male characters. As it has been shown at the beginning of this chapter, women and men lived in parallel worlds in nineteenth-century America; men were expected to be ambitious and aggressive in their struggle to obtain money, position and power while women were expected to be submissive and dependent, sensitive and emotional. Throughout his work, Melville subverts these patriarchal assumptions in two major ways: firstly, by creating male characters who display a good number of feminine features such as tolerance, sympathy, tenderness, selflessness and a tendency to rely more on intuition than on logic; secondly, by allowing only the above mentioned characters to complete their quest. According to this logic, a self-reliant "macho" man like Ahab will necessarily be doomed while Ishmael, who never denies his feminine side, is saved.

A keen observer of existence, Melville noticed that life is only possible through the interaction of opposed elements—sea/land, man/woman, good/evil, etc. From the above binary oppositions, the land/sea dichotomy is the most frequent and especially relevant as regards the novelist's rendition of the relationship between the two terms. It is important to note that this relationship extends to whatever is associated with either term: the sea is associated with man, quest, freedom of spirit, truth; the land is associated with woman, hearth, society, constraints, stagnation. The fragment below seems to express the narrator's unreserved preference for the sea:

> Let me only say that it fared with him as with the storm-tossed ship, that miserably drives along the leeward land. The port would fain give succor; the port is pitiful; in the port is safety, comfort, hearthstone, supper, warm blankets, friends, all that's kind to our mortalities. But in that gale, the port, the land, is that ship direst jeopardy; she must fly all hospitality; one touch of land though it but graze the keel, would make her shudder through and through. With all her might she crowds all sail off shore; in so doing, fights 'gainst the very winds that fain would blow her homeward; seeks all the lashed sea's landlessness again; for refuge's sake forlornly rushing into peril; her only friend her bitterest foe!
>
> Know ye, now, Bulkington? Glimpses do ye seem to see of that mortally intolerable truth; that all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore?
>
> But as in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God—so, better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than to be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety! (ch. 23, 906)

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'Despite the description of land as "slavish" or "treacherous" and the association of sea with the "highest truth" in the Bulkington passage, the narrator soon reverses the polarity to the detriment of the sea which becomes "this appalling ocean":

> Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return! (ch. 58, 1087)

Four more times the narratorial voice evokes the peace of the land, now in reversed opposition with the danger of the sea. The paradox generated by the reversal of choice is apparent. It is produced by a refusal to give prominence to either of the two terms of the binary opposition, on the one hand; on the other hand, Melville acknowledges the necessary contribution of both terms to the complex process called "life": the sea cannot be imagined without land and vice-versa; man cannot exist without woman and woman's life is impossible without man, both are indispensable to humankind; and since nature requires a balance between its elements, such a status is also necessary, Melville seems to suggest, between man and woman, on the one hand, and between feminine and masculine features in each individual, irrespective of sex, on the other hand.

One of the novelist's greatest achievements consists in deconstructing the binary oppositions established by society in order to perpetuate the patriarchal system; he vigorously attacked not only the rigid frontiers between the separate spheres of men and women but also those between acceptable-unacceptable, center-margin, truth-lie, etc.

Melvillean heroes pursue their quest both at sea and on land. Step by step, they realize that both settings do nothing but reflect the status of society in general and of human beings in particular. Both sea and land confront the quester with painful absences that can be reduced to one major source of alienation and lack of fulfillment: a basic incapacity to love, situation caused, to a large extent, by social and cultural imperatives that lead to an unbearable level of dehumanization. In this context, women no longer appear as culprits but as victims, and their absence points out to the lack of the feminine component in American society, where there is too little solidarity and too much concern for economic and technical progress; too much interest in "having," too little in "being."

It is true that Melville never makes clear what his feminine ideal really is; nonetheless, he is very specific regarding the model he rejects: that which he identifies with Queen Victoria whom he repeatedly criticizes and ridicules. In other words, he criticizes the woman who acts as a guardian of morals, who represses sex and the natural expression of feelings and who personifies the bourgeois domestic virtues. Despite occasional criticism, nonetheless, the novelist always appreciated, under the mask of everyday behavior, the

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suffering and value of women, and of features associated with them: sensitivity, generosity, kindness, compassion, etc.

Melville's women—unlike Fanny Fern's or Hawthorne's—may not be winners; however, they engage the novelist's full sympathy and acknowledgement of the dangerous void created by their absence as well as by the absence of those qualities and features they stand for. To conclude our discussion of the way in which women are represented in Melville's work it is fit to give the floor to the novelist himself; writing about Hunilla, the female character who has known the extremes of suffering and despair, he states: "Humanity, thou strong thing, I worship thee, not in the laurelled victor, but in this vanquished one" ("The Encantadas," 799).[8]

NOTES

1. See Lewis Mumford, "Amor Threatening" in Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker, eds. *Critical Essays on Melville's Pierre* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983).
2. A whaling expedition averaged about two years. See details in J. Ross Browne, *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise, with Notes of a Sojourn on the Island of Zanzibar. To Which Is Appended A Brief History of the Whale Fishery; Its Past and Present Condition.* 1846. Reprint. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968).
3. At the 1988 Melville session of the Northeast MLA Hershel Parker claimed to have found evidence that Agatha's story was eventually written by Melville although it has not yet been found.
4. For an analysis of Melville's use of the diptych structure in order to mark exclusion based on gender and class see Nancy Fredricks, *Melville's Art of Democracy* (Athens & London: University of Georgia Press, 1995), pp. 117-116.
5. Herman Melville, *The Piazza Tales.* Vol. 3 of *Melville: Pierre, Israel Potter, The Piazza Tales, The Confidence-Man, Uncollected Prose, Billy Budd*, edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1984). Further references to this work are given parenthetically in the text.
6. Jane Mushabac, *Melville's Humor: A Critical Study* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1981), p. 149.
7. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale.* Vol. 2 of *Melville: Redburn, White-Jacket, Moby-Dick*, edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle. Evanston: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1983. Further references to the work appear parenthetically in the text.
8. Hunilla appears briefly in Sketch Eighth of "The Encantadas." She is a half-breed Indian woman of Payta, Peru, who is taken, together with her brother Truxill and her husband

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Felipe, to Norfolk Island to collect tortoise oil. The French captain who takes them there never returns despite his promise to be back in four months. Hunilla loses both her companions when their small raft capsizes and they are drowned. To make her situation even more miserable she becomes, although the narratorial voice does not express it directly, the victim of gang rape perpetrated by groups of sailors. She spends three years on the island before being finally rescued and taken to the Peruvian port of Tumbex.

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