

ANALYSIS

Pierre (1852)

Herman Melville

(1819-1991)

“*Pierre* (1852) dealt with states of mind which suggest rather the age of Freud than the middle of the nineteenth century. The conflict between the hero and his mother, the attraction between him and his half-sister, both have a candor of insight and a neurotic intensity then unprecedented in novels in the English language. Contemporary readers were repelled where they were not obtuse to the hectic implications of the story.... Melville was thought to have...lost himself in the mystifying clouds of transcendentalism.”

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(Macmillan 1921-68) 84-101

“*Pierre* is a record (for a certain period) of Melville’s mystical experience. It is the story of the coming of the knowledge of good and evil, of the fall from innocence and the paradisiacal, unconscious spell of childhood; it is placed in a deliberately artificial setting, borrowed from the New England of 1850. It is more than the story of the fall, for with the fall from innocence of this modern Adam, comes a soul-shaking increase of consciousness, which could only come to one who has the legend of Christianity as his spiritual inheritance....

Melville creates *Pierre* as the God-man, one who, imaginatively conscious of the tragedy of life, would offer himself as a sacrifice to right the wrongs which Life--the father-life from which he himself has sprung--has, in moods of truculent unheedingness, created. But there is much besides, and if the reader's intuition can penetrate beneath the surface value of the symbols, he will find, recreated in the substance of this story of the soul, the fine, ambiguous threads of the warp and woof of good and evil.

Melville, in this work, more directly than in any other, attempts to formulate what he has apprehended of the mystery of life; and what is particularly interesting and remarkable is that he has placed all his apprehendings within the scope of those symbols offered by the *domestic* human circle, thus indicating that the spiritual advancement of man still exists and has its origins within the bonds of the family. Or in other words the world-images created from within outward are all sexual objects. The elements of the soul are divided into the mother and her son, the father and the son, the brother and sister, and the young man and his betrothed. These are not simple in their relationship; the brother and sister have different mothers; the boy calls his mother, sister; and later, with the coming of the consciousness of the tragedy of life, takes his sister to be his wife. The situation becomes thereby immensely complicated, and to the end it remains so, and, as a true picture of life, unresolved.

[Parts II-V of this essay treat *Pierre*’s innocent background dominated by his proud mother; his acquiescent betrothal to the pure and fair Lucy (‘the pure conscious part of himself’); his new acquaintance with his dark, illegitimate sister Isabel (‘the dark half of his soul’), her symbolic guitar, and her psychological double, Delly Ulver; his disillusionment with the God-like image of his dead father; and his mother's growing hostility as he tries to help Isabel; Part V continues thus:]

Melville, in his elaborate thoroughness, devoted a good deal of time to the whys and wherefores and reasonings which bring *Pierre* to the final resolution of establishing Isabel, not as his sister, but as his wife. The directing motive is *Pierre*’s profound recognition of Isabel as a soul-image; and it is always with the soul-image in human form that the lover wishes to unite [Jung's *anima*]. Although *Pierre*...has no thought of an incestuous relation, yet he would, to justify the deepest springs of his being, celebrate a spiritual marriage with Isabel. This is his desire, and his reasonings lead him to this end. With the awareness of things unsuspected, all values are changing, and though at first from habit he may adhere to the conventions

of good and evil, yet these values, too, are no longer set and definite. It is not long before he says: 'Look: a nothing is the substance, it casts one shadow one way, and another the other way; and these two shadows are cast from one nothing; these, so it seems to me, are Virtue and Vice.'

Therefore, all reasonings apart, the fundamental cause of his proclaimed marriage with Isabel is his profound desire for such a marriage. On this point the whole story turns. To understand what follows, the reader must make himself as emancipated from conventional thought as is Melville himself. He must not believe that Good is preferable to Evil, or Sanity to Madness; but rather recognize that Evil and Madness may be necessary and indispensable to certain phases of development. He must know, not only with his mind but with his heart, that the 'sick soul' is just as relevant to life as the 'healthy-minded' soul, and that many sick souls are spiritually far in advance of happier, healthy-minded souls. He must know, moreover, that such souls as are depicted in *Pierre*, though they go (together with all their lesser associated personalities) down into madness and death, are necessary and valuable contributions to the life of Man. We can see that if Pierre had not married Isabel, but had kept his consciousness of tragedy and mystery as something separate (though loved and recognized) from his directing soul, then madness and misery would not have inevitably followed, but we can not say it would have been *better* thus. Melville has given us the privilege of seeing another kind of happening, one which is rich in a transcendent beauty....

At this critical period, Pierre must break, if need be, with all ties and affections of the past; he will proclaim Isabel as his wife, and accept the ordeal which will prove for him the transvaluation of all values: he is thus impelled by the facts of his experience. It is suggested that because fictitiously he had tried to put his mother in the domestic relation of a sister, so now he would make his sister into a wife. This is interesting to consider in its symbolic value. He does not know fully, though he apprehends vaguely the tragedies which lie in his path. He is impelled by the innermost forces in himself; and as the guitar answers to the voice and presence of Isabel, so he hears the deep voice of her being calling him from 'the immense distances of the air, and there seemed no veto of the earth that could forbid her heavenly claim.' Hers is 'the unmistakable, unsuppressible cry of the Godhead speaking through his soul.' And while he answers this call, his conscious self would guard the memory of his father. Thereby it is suggested that he would keep justified his vision of life, while realizing that the acts and nature of life should be kept secret.

To Lucy he first makes known his changed condition. His words are short, merely announcing that he is married. He speaks, knowing that he must blast her and at this moment his earlier consciousness of a happy and innocent world falls, as does Lucy, into a swoon; she seems almost utterly to be destroyed. The vision of innocence fades before the rivalry of experience, and he is impelled to risk the death of part of his own soul.

He goes directly to his mother's mansion; in the same short words he tells her he is married. Mrs. Glendinning's pride and haughtiness rise to the rebuke. 'My dark soul,' she says, 'prophesied something dark. If already thou hast not found other lodgment, and other table than this house supplies, then seek it straight. Beneath my roof and at my table, he who was once Pierre Glendinning no more puts himself.' For Mrs. Glendinning, Pierre's wife, whoever she be, whom he has taken without her (Mrs. Glendinning's) consent, is a dark, *unknown thing*, as indeed the Spirit of Tragedy awake within an individual soul is dark and unknown to herd-consciousness.

Disinherited by his mother, he returns to Isabel, assuring her that all loss for her sake is gain, for 'she is of that fine, unshared stuff of which God makes his seraphim.' He goes together with her and Delly to the village inn. Delly he has also taken under his protection, for he perceives that she is indubitably associated with Isabel, and must from now on be her handmaiden. To the inn he brought all his private papers together with the betraying portrait of his father. These he now burns, that he may have no unnecessary weight from the past to burden his soul. This accomplished, he prepares for the journey to the city.

Very early the next morning they enter the stage coach, and travel throughout the day. During this fateful journey they are all silent. Delly and Isabel sit with faces averted, and Pierre, plunged in gloomy contemplation of the bivalent nature of life, broods over the evils he has been forced to visit on Lucy and his mother in following what so clearly seems his best and most commanding impulse. In this mood of despondency his fingers close on a pamphlet, or rather on a fragment of a pamphlet, left by some former

traveler. He looks at it at first unseeingly, but after a while begins to read with increasing interest. This pamphlet is a lecture by one Plotinus Plinlimmon. It is the first of three hundred and thirty-three lectures and is entitled: *Chronometricals and Horologicals...*

The writer contrasts those values which condition and rule in the universe of transcendental Being with those others, which in the practical way of life, are found convenient in the every-day world of Becoming; and he suggests that since we are willy nilly in the world of Becoming, we can not in practice live by the transcendental values of that greater universe which our souls apprehend, without doing evil to both ourselves and others. Pierre reads and understands more than he is aware of at the time; indeed he carries the understanding of that pamphlet in his unconscious to determine his later acts. It is this that sets him a little bit aslant from his line of transcendental idealism, makes him a rebel against the destiny which is the guerdon of an enlarged and religious consciousness, inculcating a doctrine of exalted and aloof non-benevolence. Thus Pierre, under the influence of a philosophy which is not his by nature to fulfil, fails, both in the world of ordinary human values, and in that other universe of all-accepting, Christ-like love to which he has aspired.

There are hints here, developed more fully in the following story, which throw interesting illuminings on Melville's psychology. He is a deep searcher into the ways of life, the purity of whose perception is in some way clouded. Men such as Meister Eckhart and Jacob Behmen, are mystics both by nature and circumstance. Melville seems rather to be primarily a thinker, who by the accident of deep experience has become a mystic. He is never quite content to be led solely by the inner light, and though he is enough of a mystic to know that he can not rely upon the conclusions of thought, there are always not far distant, even in his most mystic moods, conscious strivings which sometimes seem to further his search and sometimes to drive him the more recklessly into a region of oblivion. Of this region he writes: 'But the example of many minds, forever lost, like undiscoverable Arctic explorers, amid those treacherous regions, warns us entirely away from them; and we learn that it is not for man to follow the trail of Truth too far, since by so doing he entirely loses the directing compass of his mind; for arrived at the Pole, to whose barrenness only it points, there, the needle indifferently respects all points of the horizon alike.'

This is not the mystic speaking but the baffled thinker, and it is the thinker in Pierre who understands the pamphlet of Plotinus Plinlimmon. This thinker is at variance with the mystic acceptance of either Isabel or Lucy. He does not accept the child-like and twice-born wisdom of either his dark or his bright angel; he *thinks*, continually he thinks, and will not rest from thinking; his thought would persuade him to the attitude of a man who would master space and time with an aloof non-benevolence; his mind persuades him of the possibility of such a mastery, and at critical moments he hesitates between the polite, non-benevolent and aloof masterliness of Plinlimmon, and the tragic acceptance of the *Untergang* that the embracing of the religious principle involves. This is the tragedy of a divided nature, and Melville, in writing *Pierre*, has set down a large portion of his own psychic history. In the end of this story, though neither triumphant nor serene but passionately grasping at despair and self-immolation, poor Pierre declares himself neuter; the twin angels of his soul have both of them fallen into decline.

But many things happen before the end, and the complex events which follow are often not obvious of interpretation; yet the inner reality is always to be found, and, once found, is far more significant than the surface happenings of the story. These latter often seem wild and fantastic, crowded with continual use of symbolism; often the smallest details shine with significance. New characters are introduced; representing tendencies or complexes within the *psyche*. Isolated and individualized, they stand out the clearer, and can be the more easily grouped to show the intense inner conflict. Glen Stanley is the respectable counterpart and worldly double of Pierre, just as Dely is the sensual double of Isabel. These seemingly separate personalities only amplify one human consciousness....

[Part VII continues with the symbolic difficulties of the characters in the city, while Part VIII deals with the arrival there of Lucy (Pierre's 'innocent consciousness' as opposed to Isabel, his 'seductive... unconscious') and then proceeds thus:]

Pierre continues to work on at his book. In this work, in his cold, isolated room, he is cut off from both Lucy and Isabel; their offered helps he refuses. Lucy, now occupying the empty room on the other side of

the kitchen, works at a secret portrait. Isabel gives an involuntary homage to the heavenly virtue of her rival; even her guitar answers sometimes when Lucy speaks; and Delly, the almost mute, unconscious vital-dynamism of this strange trio, cooks for and waits upon them all.

The stage is set for the last and fatal struggle of these inner forces, and it were well to review our former analysis and carry it further. Pierre's mother is the world-substance which enfolds him: under her sway he is still in the womb. He must free himself, and with the coming of a larger, individual consciousness, burst the husk. In that act lies the cause of his mother's death. He would seem to discover an outlet for growth in Isabel, and with growth, freedom. She is for him, in that first contact, the consciousness of the tragic aspect of life, and also the channel of contact with all the mysteriousness of unknown forces. But she is more than this, and, if we look closely, we shall see an interesting relation between Pierre's mother and Isabel. Isabel is, as it were, the complement, and not the opposite of his mother, and, as the complement, is of the same material. The incestuous relation is still retained, and in place of a mother Pierre has substituted a sister; his introversion in relation to the sister, and his espousing her as his wife, is a disguised incest-tendency towards his mother. Not only have we the incest-tendency shown clearly, but the incest-prohibition, for he renounces both Isabel and Lucy and with them the complete erotic experience, in order that he may remain a child. The mother-material which is in Isabel, namely the mysteriousness, the beauty, and the divine-seeming moods of indolence are of *danger* to Pierre. At the last, with the vial of poison in her bosom, she names herself, the murderer of Pierre.

But all this, it must be clearly understood, has no part in actuality. This is not intended as a simple story of the freeing from the physical mother, as perhaps some schools of psycho-analysts would name it. It is the story of a conscious soul attempting to draw itself free from the psychic world-material in which most of mankind is unconsciously always wrapped and enfolded, as a foetus in the womb. Melville would draw the history and the tragedy of a soul seeking freedom outside (or rather apart from) the world-substance. And here we find an analogy in the book which immediately precedes Pierre.

In this comparison we see that, as the mysterious Isabel is a danger and a final destruction to the virtuous Pierre (Pierre, who is Melville's representation of the God-man), so the mysterious white whale in *Moby-Dick* is a danger and an ultimate destruction to Ahab and all his crew (Ahab being the Man-god). Isabel is of the same world-substance (mother-substance) as Moby Dick; the aspect from which they are viewed constituting the difference. Their...attractiveness and their all-engulfing destructiveness is the same. If we have understood the books aright, we see them as complementary aspects of the same problem. And here again it should be emphasized that Isabel is no more a symbol of *evil* than is the white whale. In both these books Melville is dealing with life-values which are beyond good and evil. Only from the terrestrially human standpoint, and still enwrapped in that same mother-substance of the world, do these words have any meaning.

Lucy, with her heavenly love and her heavenly acceptance of the event, is an essence direct from the universe of transcendental Being; and although, as Pierre's innocence of conscience, she was framed to save him from the brother-sister incest relation, which, as we have seen, is reversion into the world-substance, she is of too heavenly a nature to offer adequate compensation to the lure of Isabel. She is too pure and too frail in her earthly manifestation. In actuality she has not earthly strength enough to portray him as he should be *in the flesh*; she draws him only in the skeleton. And, when at the crisis of his fate he bursts in to see the portrait, she sits mute and unmoving, allowing him to rush away *from her* to his destruction.

Attended upon each hand by these familiars (his heavenly and his earthly Aphrodite) Pierre still works at his book, seeking to find in thought a deliverance from his fate, his fate sealed already by his union with Isabel. His forces fail him; he can do no more. 'A general and nameless torpor seems stealing upon him.' In this state of semi-consciousness he has a vision, in which are contrasted man's earthly household, peace and the ever-encroaching appetite of God; here is given (symbol of Pierre as a thinker) the giant Enceladus, who would storm the heavenly heights, and regain his paternal birthright even by fierce escalade, but who is overthrown by the gods themselves, with a mountain heaved upon his back, and pinned to the earth. As Enceladus he sees himself battering the steeps of heaven with his bare, armless torso....

From this vision Pierre rises and, on an impulse, offers to take his two companions out into the city. Isabel is overjoyed that he has left his 'hateful book.' She hates it as part of the realm of thought, and thus opposed to her. Pierre offers to take them out on the sea--a desire for further contact with the unconscious. This last passage is so tremendously charged with events and symbolic significance that it should be read carefully and in detail. Every detail counts, and not only what is written, but the great silent vistas between the words; these need all faculties to grasp their suggestiveness. The mysterious picture of a *foreigner*, that to Pierre resembles the portrait of his father, and to Isabel resembles her memory of her father, when he came to see her at the farm after she had left the asylum, this foreign picture clothes the image of the father in yet further ambiguousness; and this is further enhanced by Lucy's preoccupation with the copy of Guido's 'Beatrice Cenci.' These two pictures front one another on opposite sides of the gallery, 'so that in secret they seemed to be pantomimically talking over the heads of the living spectators below.' This, in the light of recent psychological research, is significant enough, and significant, too, Isabel's excitement at the motion of the boat, and her desire to plunge over the side and float away into the blue profound where sky and sea meet.

The end comes swiftly. Pierre, who has been wrought to the uttermost extreme of exasperation by the hostile gestures of his double, Glen Stanley, now ruthlessly murders that part of himself which Glen symbolizes, and in so doing: 'His own hand had extinguished his house in slaughtering the only unoutlawed human being by the name of Glendinning.' After this action of inner violence he falls into a self-shut-in state of gloom and despondency, well symbolized by the prison. But even in prison he is attended by his two angels; Lucy, so long as sanity remains, will ever cleave to his soul, however great his despair, and Isabel is that deeper part which can not be separated even by death or madness. Enveloped by the uttermost despair, and surrounded by the ruin which has become his fate, he knows them, in a light of a newly-won wisdom, as the Fool of Virtue and the Fool of Truth. Himself, as the Fool of Fate, has already repudiated them both."

E. L. Grant Watson
The New England Quarterly 3
(April 1930) 195-234

"The new novel he called *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*—a 'rural bowl of milk,' as he described it, jesting grimly about the fallen innocence of his country-bred Hamlet-hero... Even friends and friendly critics were dismayed by the ambiguities of *Pierre*, while the simpler sort were content to be disgusted with the theme of incest.... When Pierre deserts Lucy and love to do what he thinks is his heaven-directed duty, his change for happiness departs.... The discordances of *Pierre*...arise from the fact that Melville attempted to accomplish by new methods more than any novelist had previously undertaken. He was unfortunate in his choice of an incestuous relationship for the central situation of the novel, though this was probably forced on him by his allegorical theme of the incest between Heavenly Truth and the Heaven-born evil of Earth.... The literary society of New York had begun to disgust him. Even his faithful friends the Duyckinck brothers were deep in the business of promoting writers whom he no longer admired. In Book XVII of *Pierre* he satirizes, with some transparent allusions, this amiable society... Since he was in debt to Harper's until 1864, he drew no royalties from the books which bore their imprint.... Ill health dragged at his spirits...a breakdown soon after *Pierre* was published caused fears for his sanity."

Willard Thorp
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63)

"In *Pierre*, Plotinus Plinlimmon had been permitted to develop his interesting theory about the difference between chronometrical and horological time. According to Plotinus, as 'the earthly wisdom of man' is 'heavenly folly to God,' so 'the heavenly wisdom of God' is 'earthly folly to man.' Christ, it is true, lived by chronometrics alone and remained without folly or sin, but when inferior men attempt this feat, they become involved 'in strange unique follies and sins, unimagined before'.... 'A virtuous expediency, then, seems the highest desirable or attainable excellence for the mass of men, and is the only earthly excellence that their Creator intended for them'.... [This is an anti-Christian philosophy and Melville is satirizing Plinlimmon, who embodies the practical aspect of Emerson.] Like Hawthorne, he found Emersonian optimism unconvincing and felt the psychological truth of the doctrine of original sin even while he rejected it as dogma.... Disillusioned moderns have often used [Melville] as a vehicle for the

expression of their own disappointment in life. Much Melville criticism, in other words, is merely autobiography.”

Edward Wagenknecht
*Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century*
(Holt 1952)

“*Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (1852), his seventh novel in as many years, is a deeply personal, desperately pessimistic book, one which more nearly than any other projects Melville’s own psychological conflicts... At times beautifully written, at times turgid, *Pierre* always suggests the author’s own inner turbulence and his descent into the maelstrom of self... Pierre Glendinning, heir to a country estate and a pleasantly semi-aristocratic life, rejects both, as well as his fiancée, Lucy Tartan, in an attempt to protect the interests of a young woman, Isabel, who, on the slimmest of evidence, has convinced Pierre that they are brother and sister.... His headstrong pursuit of principle is calamitous; he is denounced by his relatives, and forced to live in poverty. Having indirectly caused the death of his mother, Lucy, and Isabel, he commits murder and, finally, suicide. His recognition of his own incestuous passion for Isabel concludes Pierre’s transformation from a charming innocent into a tempestuous cynic.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 723-28

“In *Pierre*...Melville turned for the first time from the sea to the land for his setting and from adventure to love for his narrative interest. He thought, at least on one level, that he was writing a conventional domestic romance, and he looked forward to recouping the losses sustained by *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick*. And in fact, *Pierre* does follow in broad outline the domestic romance, dwelling at length for narrative interest on relationships for sentimental effect. But *Pierre* never enjoyed the popularity of the novels of the domestic sentimentalists precisely because it was too intimately domestic. When Melville expected *Pierre* to be popular, he either did not realize how ambiguously he wrote or else he believed, mistakenly, that he had concealed his complex meanings from popular view. *Pierre’s* public apparently recognized the drama of incest and did not like the indecent family exposure. It is ironic that Melville, in attempting to write his most orthodox book, wrote what is probably his most shocking.

The main plot-lines of *Pierre*, when extracted and set forth in isolation, are startlingly simple and melodramatic. Pierre Glendinning, apple of his mother’s eye, heir to the rich country estate of Saddle Meadows, and affianced to lovely, blonde Lucy Tartan, discovers one day that a disturbing, dark beauty named Isabel Banford is his half sister, the illegitimate daughter of his father by a French girl. Pierre decides that he must not ruin his dead father’s reputation and that he cannot destroy his mother’s noble image of his father. To discharge his duty to his poor sister, he announces that he is married to her and takes her off to New York to support her. This sacrificial act results in a series of catastrophes. Pierre’s mother disinherits her son, languishes for a time, and then dies. Lucy breaks with her parents and follows Pierre to New York, there to join him and Isabel in a convenient but startling domestic arrangement. Lucy’s brother and Pierre’s cousin (the new heir to Saddle Meadows) attempt to rescue her against her wishes; in the ensuing feud Pierre kills his cousin. Imprisoned for his crime, Pierre receives Isabel and Lucy in his cell. When Isabel reveals that she is Pierre’s sister, Lucy falls dead. Pierre and Isabel then drink from a vial of poison.

Were *Pierre* nothing but this somewhat ridiculous tale, perhaps it would have been popular during its day. But Melville subtitled the work *The Ambiguities* for good reason. Virtue and vice, right and wrong, are not so obvious as this melodramatic plot suggests or a ‘popular’ public would want. Even to this day, readers are still debating the book’s real meaning. All the critics agree that Melville manipulates the psychology of his characters with a subtlety far in advance of his time. They all disagree as to his intentions. Debate centers on the Plinlimmon pamphlet, the document Pierre finds and reads as he is carrying Isabel off to New York. No interpretation can avoid the question—is Plinlimmon’s advocacy of a ‘virtuous expediency’ rather than an ‘absolute’ morality Melville’s truth or Melville’s satire? The answer to this question determines the theme of *Pierre*.

In the many close examinations of *Pierre*, there is still no general agreement on even the most crucial questions of interpretation. Is Pierre's downfall brought about by a deficiency or flaw within his character, by some weakness or evil within society, or by some subtle combination of the two? The weight of criticism appears to support the view that the Plinlimmon episode is satirical and that Pierre's genuine innocence places the blame for his plight and final catastrophe on the shortcomings of society. But many of the questions this interpretation raises remain unanswered. Principal among them is the nature of an innocence that seems to catch glimpses of its hidden guilt, that seems to peer deeply into the darkness of its own 'pure' motives.

At the beginning of his story, Pierre Glendinning differs from almost all the other Young Seekers in Melville. Taji, Redburn, and Ishmael were common sailors, refugees from dreary, poverty-ridden households. Pierre is a young landed aristocrat, heir to a country estate of considerable size. Taji, Redburn, and Ishmael were souls already soured by the world; Pierre, as his story begins, is in a state of almost unbelievable bliss, domestically intimate with a doting mother and romantically linked to a beautiful girl in an engagement universally approved. In short, Pierre is the epitome of Happiness and Innocence, or so he seems.

But just how innocent is Pierre in the intimate relationship with his mother, Mary Glendinning? He apparently rejects her real role as mother, and at times accepts her as 'Sister' (Pierre 'mourned that so delicious a feeling as fraternal love had been denied him'), at other times even as mistress (Mary Glendinning glows in the 'lover-like adoration of Pierre'). When Pierre addresses his mother as 'Sister Mary,' he is expressing a much more complex feeling than he realizes; 'Nor could the fictitious title, which he so often lavished upon his mother, at all supply the absent reality [of a sister]. This emotion was most natural; and the full cause and reason of it even Pierre did not at that time entirely appreciate. For surely a gentle sister is the second best gift to man; and it is first in point of occurrence; for the wife comes after. He who is sisterless, is as a bachelor before his time. For much that goes to make up the deliciousness of a wife, already lies in the sister.' The appellation, then, is by no means innocent; for to convert a mother into a sister in whom resides the 'deliciousness of a wife' suggests a latent incestuous desire.

And to live on such intimate terms as this mother and son is to live dangerously on the edge of this desire. Pierre's 'lover-like adoration' is deliberately evoked by his mother's careful attention to her physical attractiveness: 'With Mrs. Glendinning it was one of those spontaneous maxims, which women sometimes act upon without ever thinking of, never to appear in the presence of her son in any dishabille that was not eminently becoming... As in the admiring love and graceful devotion of Pierre lay now her highest joy in life; so she omitted no slightest trifle which could possibly contribute to the preservation of so sweet and flattering a thing.' This extraordinary love, however, not 'limited in duration by that climax which is so fatal to ordinary love...seemed almost to realize here below the sweet dreams of those religious enthusiasts, who paint to us a Paradise to come.' (Italics added.) The disparity between what is and what *seems* constitutes the essence of Pierre's ambiguities.

If the innocence of Pierre's relationship with his mother is open to question, so, too, is the depth of his ebullient happiness in the prospect of his imminent marriage to Lucy Tartan. Lucy is beauty personified. She makes the viewer wonder 'that in a world so full of vice and misery as ours, there should yet shine forth this visible semblance of the heavens.' She is noiseless and insubstantial: 'Thus far she hath floated as stilly through this life, as thistle-down flats over meadows.' The term 'angelic' is applied to her so often as to cast some doubt on her earthly origins. Pierre's engagement to this ethereal creature has been maneuvered, as he vaguely realizes, by his and Lucy's mother, and even by the 'naïve' Lucy herself; the announcement of the engagement has been precipitated by Lucy's two brothers.

But Pierre has thought, 'I'm entirely willing to be caught, when the bait is set in Paradise, and the bait is such an angel.' So he has assured himself. But that he needs such assurance suggests a conflict in his deepest feelings. In the opening 'love' scene of the book, already there are curious constraints: 'Then would Pierre burst forth in some screaming shout of joy; and the striped tigers of his chestnut eyes leaped in their lashed cages with a fierce delight. Lucy shrank from him in extreme love; for the extremist top of love, is Fear and Wonder.'" Again and again Melville emphasizes through situation and metaphor that Pierre's robust love and strength of passion are far too vigorous for Lucy's frail ethereality, as symbolized

particularly by her snow-white, 'holy' bedroom. And already in this initial 'love idyll,' Lucy is disturbed by remembrance of Pierre's story of a 'dark-eyed, lustrous, imploring, mournful face.'

For even before Pierre has discovered the convenient excuse of his familial relationship, he has been so haunted by the 'mystically' pale face of Isabel that he has confided to Lucy his misgivings. When she expresses to him her uneasiness ('Ah, Pierre, sometimes I have thought,--never will I wed with my best Pierre, until the riddle of that face be known'), he immediately regrets the confidence: 'Cursed be the hour I acted on the thought, that Love hath no reserves.' Intrusion of the face has instantly destroyed the magic of the afternoon for both Lucy and Pierre. Pierre's response to the unknown face is a puzzle. If he unconsciously recognizes in the anonymous Isabel a resemblance to the youthful 'chair-portrait' of his father, his excited response is charged with a thrill of anticipation inexplicable in terms of mere recognition.

A concluding episode which ends the afternoon outing of the two 'lovers' makes clear that Pierre's unconscious attraction to Isabel's dark but powerful beauty is founded on a deeply suppressed revulsion at his 'beloved' Lucy's ethereal loveliness. After Pierre takes Lucy home, she asks him to fetch her portfolio of drawings from her bedroom. Pierre's moment in Lucy's room bestows a terrifying glimpse into his own ambiguous passions. 'The carpet seemed as holy ground. Every chair seemed sanctified by some departed saint.' As Pierre moves across the room, he glimpses in a mirror an image of Lucy's bed, and the experience is traumatic: 'For one swift instant, he seemed to see in that one glance the two separate beds—the real one and the reflected one—and an unbidden, most miserable presentiment thereupon stole into him.' The image which stays in his mind is the 'spotless bed' and 'a snow-white roll' beside the pillow; Pierre longs 'to unroll the sacred secrets of that snow-white, ruffled thing.' When he returns to Lucy with her portfolio, he exclaims, 'Ah, thou hold angel, Lucy!' Although Pierre's love for Lucy seems superficially intensified, his 'miserable presentiment' suggests that he glimpses the naked truth that life with Lucy, though full of holy passions, would bring no fulfillment of earthly ones. Lucy is angelic—and sexless.

Ultimately, then, Pierre, at the beginning, is not far different from Taji, Redburn, or Ishmael. And after the discovery of his half sister Isabel and the decision to take flight with her, Pierre falls into the role of these Young Seekers who reject the world they inherit and set out in search of a new. Unlike Redburn, White Jacket, and Ishmael, however, Pierre never becomes reconciled to the world as it is. His quest is ceaseless, like Taji's, and ends only with his death, like Ahab's. Pierre dons the mask of innocence and engages in a Titanic struggle with the evil of this world. And like Taji and Ahab, he finds himself finally and horribly committed to an evil greater than that he had first recognized and defied.

Pierre is so haunted by the strange face he has glimpsed and so prepared, by intuition and presentiment, for high romance that it takes no more than an unverified letter, anonymously and mysteriously delivered, to sway him forever from the main purposes of his life. After he reads the letter in which Isabel Banford declares herself daughter of his father, sister to himself, Pierre not only accepts the new role of brother with high passion but plots his course with overwhelming determination. Pierre vows—"Henceforth I will know nothing but Truth; glad Truth, or sad Truth; I will know what *is*, and do what my deepest angel dictates.' Like Ahab, who swears to Starbuck that he will strike through the 'pasteboard masks' of the world, Pierre swears, 'I tear all veils; henceforth I will see the hidden things; and live right out in my own hidden life!' The response is far more emotionally charged than a mere unverified letter could call forth, and the reason is clear. Pierre intuitively but only half-consciously detects in the unfolding situation a way to the fulfillment of his unspeakable desires while masquerading them, to himself and to the world, as pure and noble impulses.

In preparing himself for his new role of brother to his half-sister Isabel, Pierre suffers a series of shocks as he gradually recognizes the many deceptions which surrounded his innocent youth. The father loved by both the son and the mother turns out to be far different from the sacred image worshiped by them. In his 'affair' with the French girl, mother of Isabel, Pierre's father proved himself heir to ignoble weaknesses of the flesh, a man capable of infidelity to the bonds of marriage, and, crowning all, capable of concealing his guilt behind a mask of domestic bliss and public eminence. This terrible, new view of his father necessitates an alteration in his long-held view of his mother. The image of the 'lovely, immaculate

mother' fades as Pierre, confronted by the truth about the unfaithfulness of his father, instinctively realizes that Mary Glendinning 'would crumble into nothing before it.' The great moral stamina he had always assumed to be a part of his mother's angelic character, he recognizes finally as fiction. Pierre's intuitive knowledge of his mother's reaction is confirmed as he observes how coldly, unmercifully, unforgivingly—even casually—she condemns that 'vile fellow Ned' and Delly Ulver and her infant, inhabitants of the Glendinning estate, whose situation ironically parallels that of Pierre's father and the mother of Isabel.

The idyllic, innocent world of his youth crumbling about him, hastened in part by his desire to see it fall, Pierre rushes to Isabel more certain than ever of the path of his duty. He is more elated than he knows in the discovery of his mother's incapacity for forgiveness or understanding. This discovery seems to cloak with righteousness his own obscure but thrilling longings for Isabel. 'Pierre, though charged with the fire of all divineness, his containing thing was made of clay.' Melville himself grows wary about the revelations of Pierre's inner character and feels it necessary to offer an explanation. In an aside to the reader, he says: 'How shall I steal yet further into Pierre, and show how this heavenly fire was helped to be contained in him, by mere contingent things, and things that he knew not. But I shall follow the endless, winding way,—the flowing river in the cave of man; careless whither I be led, reckless where I land.' The ironic truth is that the flame of Pierre's 'heavenly fire' of righteousness is fed by Isabel's alluring attractiveness: 'Womanly beauty, and not womanly ugliness, invited him to champion the right'....

That 'flowing river in the cave of man' which Melville explores so deeply in *Pierre* flows through us all: ...the unconscious, the hidden receptacle of our suppressed desires.... Confronted by the dilemma of discovering the 'righteous way out of a predicament charged with immense possibilities for evil, Pierre reasons his way tortuously (and more deviously than he knows) toward a novel solution. Pierre's psychology becomes the central drama of the book as he wrestles with the multitude of conflicting impulses besetting him. Pierre dimly understands that his affection for Isabel far transcends the feelings of a brother for a sister: he 'felt that never, never would he be able to embrace Isabel with the mere brotherly embrace; while the thought of any other caress, which took hold of any domesticness, was entirely vacant from his uncontaminated soul, for it had never consciously intruded there.' *Consciously*, perhaps not; but, the implication is clear—*unconsciously*, yes. This is the central ambiguity in this book of ambiguities. *Consciously* Isabel becomes 'transfigured in the highest heaven of uncorrupted Love'; *unconsciously* she becomes the desired object of Pierre's deepest physical passion.

As Pierre's heart has been frozen by the frigid whiteness and spotless purity of Lucy, so it has been melted by the warm darkness of Isabel. If Lucy is unalloyed holy angel, Isabel is of a more complex substance: her face, 'hovering between Tartarean misery and Paradisiac beauty,' is compounded...of hell and heaven.' On that memorable first encounter that was to leave so lasting an impression, Isabel is associated with darkness: 'Her unadorned and modest dress is black; fitting close up to her neck, and clasping it with a plain, velvet border.' And her dark, olive cheek is without a blush.' On their first meeting as 'brother and sister,' Isabel falls into Pierre's arms: 'He felt a faint struggling within his clasp; her head drooped against him; his whole form was bathed in the flowing glossiness of her long and unimprisoned hair.' From this moment to his death, when he lies entangled in Isabel's tresses—'arborescent...in ebon vines'—Pierre is fascinated by the mysterious darkness of her long black hair—which both lures and ensnares.

Pierre formulates a number of 'grand resolutions' that are contradictory. There must be a 'public acknowledgment of Isabel' and, at the same time, a 'charitable withholding of her existence' from his own mother. He must 'screen' his father's honorable memory from reproach,' and yet there must be 'open vindication' of his 'fraternalness to Isabel.' Confronting himself with these mutually exclusive goals, with a deliberateness far greater than he knows, he drives himself to the point of madness. He must work himself up emotionally to the supreme conviction that to go to Isabel is to follow Dante and Shakespeare in the *Inferno* and *Hamlet*, to follow Duty and Virtue, to follow, indeed, the way of God, while to stay with his mother and Lucy is to deny Dante and Shakespeare, to commit Evil, to end, finally, in Hell. In the agony of decision, Pierre conveniently discovers that he cannot live with the 'cowardly' Pierre. But there is ambiguity in the self-recognition as Pierre peers into his own soul. What, indeed, is the identity Pierre loathes? 'The cheeks of his soul collapsed in him: he dashed himself in blind fury and swift madness against the wall, and fell dabbling in the vomit of his loathed identity.'

It is significant that Pierre finds his solution only the morning following this peak of emotional fury, apparently after night and sleep have opened his unconscious for unholy communion with his soul. He awakes with his course determined but his 'real' motive still veiled: he will proclaim to the world that he and Isabel are wed, thereby discharging his 'brotherly' obligation without destroying his father's name or his mother's faith. The greatest 'victim,' he assures himself, in this act of 'unequaled renunciation' will be himself. But Melville immediately tells the reader that there are other 'persuasions and potencies than those direct ones' which have 'unconsciously left their ineffaceable impressions on him, and perhaps without his privity' have 'mainly contributed to his resolve'—'magnetic' Isabel herself, with her 'bewildering eyes and marvelous story.'

When Pierre embraces Isabel and whispers to her the plan of marriage and flight he has formulated, both she and Pierre reach a new depth in the understanding of their real feelings. Isabel looks at Pierre with the 'inexpressible strangeness of an intense love, new and inexplicable.' And over the face of Pierre shoots 'a terrible self-revelation.' Their response is immediate and passionate: 'He imprinted repeated burning kisses upon her' pressed hard her hand; would not let her sweet and awful passiveness.' And Melville draws the curtain on the guilty love scene in a metaphorical and highly suggestive language: 'Then they changed; they coiled together, and entangled stood mute.' The 'loathed identity' which had before driven Pierre toward madness has become in this scene a 'terrible self-revelation.' As Isabel and Pierre 'coil together,' there can be no doubt that they cast aside their masks of innocence, confront openly and directly for the first time their physical attraction to each other, and indulge their passions. They enact anew the old, old roles of Adam and Eve in the Fall: surely entangled in their 'coil' is the ancient Garden's enduring serpent.

Pierre's struggle bestows on him a heightened moral awareness: what he discovers behind society's masks dismays him. 'In the joyous young times, ere his great grief came upon him, all the objects which surrounded him were concealingly deceptive.' Now they stand revealed for what they are and the revelations shake the foundations of his being: 'Not only was the long-cherished image of his father now transfigured before him from a green foliated tree into a blasted trunk, but every other image in his mind attested the universality of that electral light which had darted into his soul. Not even his lovely, immaculate mother, remained entirely untouched, unaltered by the shock.'

Throughout his youth his father had been for Pierre the sustaining image of his family faith. Now the father, stripped of his awesome cloak of respectability, is discovered guilty of compounding a sin of the flesh by concealing it. The ambiguities of the nature of Pierre's father are suggested by the two antithetical portraits, one made in his bachelorhood, the other as the head of the family at Saddle Meadows. Pierre owns the early portrait, given him by an old maiden aunt, and he has placed it in a private closet of his room: it reveals a 'brisk, unentangled, young bachelor, gayly ranging up and down in the world; light-hearted, and a very little blandish perhaps; and charged to the lips with the first uncloying morning fullness and freshness of life.' This picture of Pierre's father is 'namelessly unpleasant and repelling' to Pierre's mother. She emphatically prefers the later portrait as one which conveys correctly 'his features in detail, and more especially their truest, and finest, and noblest combined expression.' This portrait is of a 'middle-aged, married man, and seem[s] to possess all the nameless and slightly portly tranquilities, incident to that condition when a felicitous one.'

Pierre's new knowledge of his father is paralleled by a fresh insight into his mother. He finally comes to understand that 'Infinite Haughtiness had first fashioned her; and then the haughty world had further molded her; nor had a haughty Ritual omitted to finish her.' Pierre muses, 'Now, do I remember that in her most caressing love, there ever gleamed some scaly, glittering folds of pride.' Pierre's intuition that his mother could not morally assimilate the knowledge he holds is confirmed by her display of ethical rigidity in the discussion with the Reverend Falsgrave, her minister and suitor, about the adultery case at Saddle Meadows. When finally he makes his fateful decision and announces to his mother his 'marriage,' she replies: 'My dark soul prophesied something dark. If already thou hast not found other lodgment, and other table than this house supplies, then seek it straight. Beneath my roof, and at my table, he who was once Pierre Glendinning no more puts himself.' Mary Glendinning's pride will never permit her to reverse her sentence, and she is to disinherit Pierre, leave Saddle Meadows to Pierre's cousin, and go to her death never

realizing that Pierre's confession of marriage was the desperate means to conceal from her an infidelity whose knowledge would destroy the most intimate illusions of her life.

Pierre's cousin is the third great jolt in Pierre's awakening to reality. Glendinning Stanly had been in boyhood one of Pierre's most intimate friends. 'At the age of ten, they had furnished an example of the truth, that the friendship of fine-hearted, generous boys, nurtured amid the romance-engendering comforts and elegancies of life, sometimes transcends the bounds of mere boyishness, and revels for a while in the empyrean of a love which only comes short, by one degree, of the sweetest sentiment entertained between the sexes.' Though in maturity the friendship of Pierre and Glen has grown less ardent, it has not died, and as Pierre leaves Saddle Meadows in his new social status and with his numerous newly-acquired dependents (including Delly Ulver and her illegitimate child), it is his hope to accept Glen's long-standing offer of a charming house—an offer made at a time when Pierre's marriage with Lucy appeared imminent.

Upon his arrival in New York City with his retinue of distraught females, Pierre discovers the house bolted tight against his admission. And when he goes to his cousin's splendid establishment, Pierre must force his way in, only to be denied recognition by his cousin. Pierre hardly recognizes his cousin. 'The dandy and the man; strength and effeminacy; courage and indolence, were so strangely blended in this superb-eyed youth, that at first sight, it seemed impossible to decide whether there was any genuine mettle in him, or not.' Glen's pretense not to know his cousin enrages Pierre—but Pierre's only course is to vent his anger and depart.

This final estrangement cuts off Pierre's last possible resource—except himself. His dead father has failed him; his living mother has disinherited him; his closest friend has denied him. He stands at the moment of his greatest responsibility absolutely alone. And all that he has done is in the name of Virtue. As he is indirectly the cause of his mother's death, so he deals the deathblow directly to his once beloved cousin. By this time Glen Stanly has inherited Saddle Meadows and is seeking to remove Lucy Tartan from Pierre's New York establishment. Pierre does not conceal his hate: 'Tis speechless sweet to murder thee!' And with this 'crime,' Pierre's fate is sealed: 'Spatterings of his own kindred blood were upon the pavement; his own hand had extinguished his house in slaughtering the only unoutlawed human being by the name of Glendinning.'

Discovery of the world's evil proves too great a burden for Pierre. He cannot come to terms with the terrible knowledge he has gained. And he cannot reconcile himself to his own deepest knowledge of his desires. The masks worn by his father, mother, and cousin differ from Pierre's only in the quality of the deception they conceal: theirs is a petty and shamefully trivial wickedness, while Pierre's sin is measured on a heroic scale: his mask conceals as much from himself as it does from the world.

There was a Serenia in *Mardi* and there were maskless or 'self-unmasked' characters in *White-Jacket* and *Moby-Dick* (Jack Chase, White Jacket himself, Ishmael); similarly in *Pierre* there appear some hints for the ideal character. In this novel, however, Melville does not attempt to recreate the society or to rely on mere delineation of character, but boldly takes to pamphleteering. During the flight to New York, Pierre finds in his coach a leaflet by one Plotinus Plinlimmon entitled 'Chronometricals and Horologicals,' whose primary argument is that the same relation exists between chronometrical (or Greenwich) time and horological (or local) time as exists between heavenly wisdom and earthly wisdom. That the two are not always the same does not mean that one must be wrong or that they are even opposed: '...it follows not from this, that God's truth is one thing and man's truth another; but—as above hinted, and as will be further elucidated in subsequent lectures—by their very contradictions they are made to correspond.'

As men are not angels and somewhat less than perfect, they may best adapt their lives to the local (or earthly) time. If they attempt to live solely by heavenly time, they are doomed. Pierre's situation seems to be the precise case in point when Plinlimmon writes: '...almost invariably, with inferior beings, the absolute effort to live in this world according to the strict letter of the chronometricals is, somehow, apt to involve those inferior beings eventually in strange, *unique* follies and sins, unimagined before.'

In short, the man who attempts to live like an angel may well end up, unwittingly, or half-wittingly, or wholeheartedly, in the role of the devil—like Taji in *Mardi*, or Ahab in *Moby-Dick*, or, indeed, like Pierre

in all of his ambiguities. All of these individuals bring about their own deaths by attempting to live in accord with an absolute perfection. As Plinlimmon says (delineating in the process the character of these 'righteous' Titans): 'What man who carries a heavenly soul in him, has not groaned to perceive, that unless he committed a sort of suicide as to the practical things of this world, he never can hope to regulate his earthly conduct by that same heavenly soul? And yet by an infallible instinct he knows that that monitor can not be wrong in itself.' That the ideal is unattainable on earth renders it no less useful as a proper guide, provided one make the necessary concessions—for the sake of life itself—to 'the practical things of this world.'

The heavenly ideal which cannot practically be pursued on earth consists of such advice as 'to turn the left cheek if the right be smitten' or to 'give *all* that thou hast to the poor.' Such advice is ultimately impossible for imperfect man to follow. On the other hand, the earthly ideal is within the capabilities of man: '...if a man gives with a certain self-considerate generosity to the poor; abstains from doing downright ill to any man; does his convenient best in a general way to do good to his whole race; takes watchful loving care of his wife and children, relatives, and friends; is perfectly tolerant to all other men's opinions, whatever they may be; is an honest dealer, an honest citizen, and all that; and more especially if he believes that there is a God for infidels, as well as for believers, and acts upon that belief—then he is living a life of 'virtuous expediency' which is the 'highest desirable or attainable earthly excellence for the mass of men.'

Plinlimmon emphasizes that his theory of ethics does not embrace all wickedness by excusing some: 'This chronometrical conceit does by no means involve the justification of all acts which wicked men may perform. For in their wickedness downright wicked men sin as much against their own horologes, as against the heavenly chronometer. That this is so, their spontaneous liability to remorse does plainly evince.' And Plinlimmon concludes his pamphlet: 'I hold up a practicable virtue to the vicious; and interfere not with the eternal truth, that sooner or later, in all cases, downright vice is downright woe.'

Plinlimmon's pamphlet is in reality a philosophical expansion of that insight which White Jacket had into the discrepancy between heavenly and practical wisdom when he saw the efficient 'murderous' cannoneer indulging in genuine prayer. But whereas White Jacket instantly understands what he sees, Pierre never comprehends what he reads. He continues his attempt to live chronometrically while his 'unique' sins multiply and his follies increase. Later, when Pierre glimpses Plontinus Plinlimmon, he looks for the pamphlet he had carelessly cast aside and is unable to find it. All the time he is looking for it, it is on his very person trapped in the lining of his coat, not two inches from his hand. Melville poses this question: 'Could [Pierre]...have carried about with him in his mind the thorough understanding of the book, and yet not be aware that he so understood it?' Pierre would naturally suppress the understanding, just as, previously, he had suppressed his insight into his real motives in devising his 'pious imposture' of a marriage to Isabel.

Although Pierre is never to meet the author of the pamphlet, he is to come to know some of Plinlimmon's followers when he takes up his residence at the Bohemian Church of the Apostles and the 'Grand Master' is to be pointed out to him from a distance. Plinlimmon's tower quarters are so located as to make his window visible from Pierre's room. Pierre watches there a 'remarkable face of repose,—repose neither divine nor human, nor anything made up of either or both—but a repose separate and apart—a repose of a face by itself.' The 'blue-eyed, mystic-mild face' begins to haunt Pierre: 'When in his moods of peculiar depression and despair; when dark thoughts of his miserable condition would steal over him; and black doubts as to the integrity of his unprecedented course in life would most malignantly suggest themselves; when a thought of the vanity of his deep book would glidingly intrude, if glancing at his closet window that mystic-mild face met Pierre's under any of these influences the effect was surprising, and not to be adequately detailed in any possible words.'

The face seems to say: 'Vain! vain! vain!... Fool! fool! fool!... Quit! Quit! Quit!... Ass! Ass! Ass!' At these times the face seems to peer into Pierre's very soul: 'What was most terrible was the idea that by some magical means or other the face had got hold of his secret. 'Ay,' shuddered Pierre, 'the face knows that Isabel is not my wife! And that seems the reason it leers'...' Plinlimmon's extraordinary face functions

symbolically, much as his misplaced pamphlet, to suggest Pierre's glimpse into and revulsion at his own dark motives, and his attempt to suppress a knowledge he only obscurely possesses.

Two of Plinlimmon's apparent followers suggest the genuine complexity of the ethics of 'virtuous expediency.' The Reverend Falsgrave is not a declared adherent, but it seems clear that he is intended as a portrait of the Plinlimmon-like man. But Falsgrave is far from the ideal: he is a caricature of the philosophy carried to an extreme of equivocal inaction. Falsgrave is introduced into the action when Pierre is closely observing his mother formulating a decision disposing of the case of adultery on the estate. His position as minister renders his judgment significant. His face is 'radiant with a courtly, but mild benevolence' and he is a 'peculiarly insinuating, without the least appearance of craftiness or affectation.' He still has the 'beauty, grace, and strength' of youth and has already acquired the 'mildness' and 'wisdom' of age. Falsgrave assumes the role of mediator in the discussion of the local adultery case, cautioning Mrs. Glendinning against her hot and brittle indignation while gently rebuking Pierre for his too-generous indulgence. When Mrs. Glendinning quotes, 'The sins of the father shall be visited upon the children to the third generation,' in justification for punishment of the illegitimate child, Falsgrave asserts: 'But Madam, that does not mean, that the community is in any way to take the infamy of the children into their own voluntary hands.'

When Pierre pointedly asks, 'And what was that [our blessed Saviour] so mildly said to the adulteress,' Falsgrave after a long ambiguous preamble concludes: 'Millions of circumstances modify all moral questions; so that though conscience may possibly dictate freely in any known special case; yet, by one universal maxim, to embrace all moral contingencies,—this is not only impossible, but the attempt, to me, seems foolish.' When Pierre asks bluntly whether the commandment to 'Honor thy father and mother' admitted ever of any exceptions, again Falsgrave replies: 'That is another question in morals absolutely incapable of a definite answer, which shall be universally applicable.' At each answer Falsgrave's 'exquisitely cut cameo brooch' shows forth from the folds of his clothing, revealing a representation of 'the allegorical union of the serpent and dove.'

When Pierre visits Falsgrave late at night to find out what the minister and Pierre's mother have determined to do with the adulteress, Falsgrave tells Pierre: 'She is to depart the neighborhood; why, her own parents want her not.' Pierre is incensed, but he does not blame the clergyman: 'I think I begin to see how thy profession is unavoidably entangled by all fleshly alliances, and cannot move with godly freedom in a world of benefices.' The next day, when Falsgrave calls on Mrs. Glendinning to inform her of Pierre's peculiar behavior, he discovers her in a collapsed state, furious and frustrated at Pierre's news that he has married a 'slut.' Falsgrave assumes a posture of 'the profoundest deference' which is 'almost cringing' as he confesses his inability to console: 'Permit me to withdraw from thee, leaving my best prayers for thee, that thou mayest know some peace, ere this now shut-out son goes down.' Mrs. Glendinning orders him to leave: 'Begone! And let me not hear thy soft, mincing voice, which is an infamy to a man!' Though Falsgrave appears at first to follow the Plinlimmon philosophy, he ultimately is proved, like Starbuck in *Moby-Dick*, incapable of action. He remains too meditative, too compromising, and too disengaged.

If Falsgrave seems always to be too coolly in control of his basic human passions, *Pierre's* confessed follower of Plinlimmon, Charlie Millthorpe, seems always too much at the mercy of his outsized heart. Millthorpe, whose father once tilled Glendinning land and whose boyhood was spent in amiable companionship with Pierre, turns up in New York, first to help Pierre and his 'wife' settle in the strange quarters known as the Church of the Apostles, and later to pay off Pierre's debtor in a time of personal economic crisis. Pierre remembers Charlie as a handsome boy 'but little vigorous in mind': 'Yet was Charlie Millthorpe as affectionate and dutiful a boy as ever boasted of his brain, and know not that he possessed a far more excellent and angelical thing in the possession of a generous heart.' After experiencing one of Millthorpe's innocently-motivated, generous deeds, Pierre muses: 'Now, by heaven! The god that made Millthorpe was both a better and a greater than the god that made Napoleon or Byron... The brains grow maggoty without a heart; but the heart's the preserving salt itself, and can keep sweet without the head.'

Millthorpe is as unbalanced in faculty as Falsgrave, possessing in abundance that which had paled under too great a restraint in the minister. Although Pierre himself would like to believe that his fate is brought

about by his cultivation of the heart, his mind is too keen and is burdened by too many flashes of insight into his hidden motives for him ever to convince himself deep within of his assumed innocence. Pierre even demonstrates that he understands Plinlimmon more thoroughly than the declared disciple.... Clearly Pierre knows more of Plinlimmon and his pamphlet than he will openly confess to himself.

In his attempt to avoid the inevitable consequences of his father's sin, Pierre precipitates catastrophe. He takes on himself, publicly, the entire burden of an evil not his, yet conceals from himself a genuine guilt that works from deep within. His act of heroic 'renunciation' (which he knows is really 'fulfillment') results in incest, murder, and death. From the time that he first sees Isabel and is drawn by her dark beauty, his soul's cool innocence is compounded with hot desire. From the time that he receives the letter revealing the blood relationship, his 'chronometrical' actions constitute the commission of a 'suicide as to the practical things of this world.' Pierre's 'innocence' results in his mother's death; his own, Isabel's, and Lucy's disgrace; the murder of his cousin, Glen Stanly; and, finally, the death by shock of Lucy and the death by suicide of Isabel and himself. And, fate's final irony for Pierre, his grandiose act of innocence is precisely that which leads to his greatest sin.

In a symbolic dream shortly before his death, Pierre once again glimpses the truth of his situation. In the vision he sees, near his ancestral home, Saddle Meadows, the Mount of Titans (a mountain once christened the Delectable Mountain by an admirer of Bunyan). From a distance the peak is a beautiful, inviting purple, but this 'purple promise' turns out to be an illusion: 'Stark desolation; ruin, merciless and ceaseless; chills and gloom—all here lived a hidden life, curtained by that cunning purpleness.' On one of the paths of the mountain is 'Enceladus the Titan, the most potent of all the giants, writhing from out the imprisoning earth.' The significance of the dream is clear, but Pierre will not openly confront its meaning. The apparently noble intent has ended in terrible devastation for the simple reason that Pierre's 'containing thing' is made of clay. Like Taji and Ahab, he has sought, absolutely and without compromise, to transcend evil and has ended by becoming its votary and finally its victim."

James E. Miller, Jr.
A Reader's Guide to Herman Melville
(Farrar, Straus 1962)

"It is clear that Melville had the radical democrats and their ambiguities in mind when he wrote *Pierre*.... *Pierre* makes clear Melville's disillusionment with the Young America group [like the liberals of today], which had failed to comprehend his efforts to forge a powerful national literature out of raw, violent American materials. In the central chapter, entitled 'Young America in Literature,' Melville gets his revenge against the New York litterateurs by mocking their somewhat effete literary goals.... Young America, he learns, is a world of amorality, venality, and artificiality.... He uses popular sensational imagery to assault the staidly Conventional."

David S. Reynolds
*Beneath the American Renaissance:
The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*
(Harvard 1989)

Michael Hollister (2015)