

## ANALYSIS

*The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857)

Herman Melville

(1819-1891)

“*The Confidence-Man*, which marks the nadir of his confidence in society and Nature, and in himself as well, is the terminus of authorship for Melville.”

Harry Levin

*The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville*  
(Knopf/Vintage 1960) 194

“Melville simply carried Brook Farm to the deck of a Mississippi steamboat as in *Mardi* he had carried Europe to the South Seas. Emerson is the Confidence Man, Emerson who preached being good, not doing good, behavior rather than service.... Here Melville has his revenge on those who accused him earlier in his career of transcendental leanings. This is the great Transcendental satire.... Emerson’s fatuous essay on Friendship is required preparatory reading for this book.”

Carl Van Vechten

“The Later Work of Herman Melville”  
*The Double Dealer* 3 (January 1922)

“Written with a sublimated fury, a cynicism, and an indignation beyond anger. The Confidence Man (his disguise keeps changing as the book proceeds) is a smiling, intelligent hypocrite whose single pleasure in life is in exercising his evil spells, thereby polluting the souls of others... He knows that the desperate are always in the market for false hope.... Evil generally triumphs.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff

*The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962)

“Melville’s last work written as a professional writer. It is a novel which present-day taste should enjoy. Black humor and the literature of the absurd are much in vogue, as though they are the unique creation of the present generation, without roots in the literature of the past. The chief characteristic of the literature of the absurd is a sense of outrage masked in satirical-ridiculous episodes which upset the usual rational process of daily living. Life is seen as essentially a nightmare, and the world of ideal values is jeered at, with religion itself parodied almost to the point of sacrilege.... A nihilistic view of the universe has been the necessary fashion [Postmodernism]....

*The Confidence-Man* is a series of episodes, or conversations, which take place on the *Fidele*, a Mississippi river boat. A mysterious stranger in shifting disguises, each time as a different person, approaches various passengers asking each to extend him their ‘confidence’ in his several schemes of goodness and benevolence. All who comply are gulled. This Protean figure, a fairly clear incarnation of Satan, or the Satanic principle, at first mystifies the reader. But once his principle of masquerade and constant metamorphosis is fathomed, the story clarifies and becomes not a narrative but an allegorical satire. As the *Fidele*, an American version of the ship of fools, makes its way along the river, the Confidence Man’s victims accumulate, and American manners and modes of the mid-century are surgically exposed... This dark but delightful book was Melville’s farewell to prose fiction for more than thirty years. He ended with triumph even though the recognition of his triumph has been so long delayed, until the world arrived at a view of the universe which Melville had described and anticipated a century before.”

Howard P. Vincent

*Guide to Melville*  
(Charles E. Merrill 1969) 31-33

“After the extravagant style and unconventional psychoanalysis of *Pierre* (1852) lost him his British publisher and much of his American reputation, Melville began writing magazine stories... He mastered a sort of secret writing in which he palmed off upon his genteel publishers a series of innocuous tales which concealed highly personal allegories not meant to be understood. *The Confidence-Man* (1857) would not have been published...if its religious meanings had been obvious.... The book is a satiric allegory in which the Devil comes aboard the world-ship to swindle its passengers... [Melville has] two major satiric targets: nineteenth-century optimism and liberal theology.... Episodes satirize specific varieties of optimistic philosophies which assume that the universe is benevolent and human nature good.”

Hershel Parker  
Introduction  
*The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*  
(Norton Critical Edition 1971)

“[It] was mildly praised (particularly in England) as a satire on America, and then, along with the rest of Melville’s works, it was forgotten. In the 1920’s and 1930’s, the early days of the Melville revival, when the general view saw *Moby-Dick* as his culmination and everything thereafter as a collapse, *The Confidence-Man* was often cited as proof of Melville’s spiritual, moral, and artistic exhaustion. It was called misanthropic, bitter, despairing, desperate, hopeless, sterile, mechanical.”

H. Bruce Franklin  
Introduction  
*The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*  
(Bobbs-Merrill 1967) xv

“*The Confidence-Man* is finally being recognized as a remarkable and profound book. It is not, like Melville’s other novels, a story of adventure or the sea; rather, like *Don Quixote* or *Pilgrim’s Progress*, it is a series of parables, each exploring another aspect of what is involved when a man risks his confidence, his faith, in someone else. Like any good parable, it is accessible to as many meanings as individuals may bring to it.”

Lewis Mumford  
*Herman Melville*  
(1929; Harcourt 1956,1962) 170-76

“Perhaps Melville’s most ambitious work. It tries to define every important ethical problem known to man; it tries to dramatize man’s epistemological problems... On board the *Fidele* are heard the voices of ancient and modern philosophers, poets and gods... A comic embodiment of Emerson [Mark Winsome] refuses to buy a poem offered by a comic embodiment of Poe; shapes of Manco Capac, Christ, Satan, Vishnu, and Buddha direct the action. *The Confidence-Man* traces Western thought from its origins in the East to its ancient gods and philosophers and to their modern disciples and followers... For the game consists of unmasking man’s gods and myths.... In this universe man’s Savior--Manco Capac, Vishnu, Christ, Apollo, the Buddhists’ Buddha--is embodied by the Confidence Man, who is also man’s Destroyer--Satan, Siva, the Hindu’s Buddha. Melville’s mythology converts all gods into the Confidence Man.”

H. Bruce Franklin  
*The Wake of the Gods: Melville’s Mythology*  
(Stanford 1963) 154-187

“And the book concludes: “Something further may follow of this Masquerade.” The action cannot end, for the devil is still among us, testing his tricks as we travel on the *Fidele*. Indeed, he may very well be in the chair across from us as we close *The Confidence-Man* and look about with a slight feeling of discomfort and expectation.”

James E. Miller, Jr.  
*A Reader’s Guide to Melville*  
(Farrar, Straus/Noonday 1962) 192

Michael Hollister (2014)