

ANALYSIS

“I and My Chimney” (1856)

Herman Melville

(1819-1891)

“Modern critical analysis of Herman Melville’s ‘I and My Chimney’ (1856) began in 1941 with Merton Sealts’s careful treatment of the story as an instance of disguised autobiography. According to Sealts, ‘I and My Chimney’ represents the author’s ironic response to the psychiatric examination he was forced to undergo in 1852 or 1853: the chimney is, for Sealts, a symbol of Melville’s mind; Mr. Scribe, a caricature of Oliver Wendell Holmes (who may have performed the examination); and the narrator, a sympathetic portrait of Melville himself. During the 1940s and 50s, Sealts’s autobiographical approach (if not his particular explication) gradually became ‘standard,’ thanks to the concurrence of a host of critics. In 1960, however, Stuart Woodruff abruptly questioned Sealts’s strategy, arguing that ‘I and My Chimney’ is concerned with...the conflict (most particularly in America) between conservatism and progressivism ...viewing Melville’s chimney as symbolic of American slavery and Christianity....

In ‘I and My Chimney’ Melville adopted the creative strategy of ‘Bartleby’ and *Benito Cereno*, organizing his ideas (and energizing his plot) by contrasting two different modes of perception, two opposing habits of thought. That is, we encounter in Melville’s tale a narrator who seems the incarnation of conservatism; we also meet, in the person of the narrator’s wife, the paradigmatic progressive. Moreover, Melville’s title helps define these terms. The true conservative is one who, like the narrator, exists comfortably in relation to a select array of external conditions. When we disturb these conditions, we tamper with the psychological ‘architecture’ within which the conservative has established himself. The progressive, on the other hand, views himself as the antagonist of the status quo.... And what of the chimney itself?... It represents the forces of ‘time,’ ‘process,’ and ‘accumulated history’—those particular forces respected by the conservative and most hated by the progressive....

The author is apparently engaged in a form of political allegory in which styles of chimney-building can be taken to stand for various forms of government.... The narrator invokes an American context, reminding us that the United States, centered politically around its central ‘chimney,’ the federal Union, was in danger throughout the 1850s of being split into a ‘strictly double house’ of Northern and Southern halves. Not coincidentally, the narrator declares that the house in which he and his own chimney ‘dwell’ is in...a proportion recalling the general shape of America in 1856, spread (as of 1848) from Maine to California and from Texas to Minnesota.... The narrator’s detailed description of his chimney-ridden house seems nothing less than Melville’s colorful portrait of the American political system, centered around the federal Union. Much, of course, was to be said for that Union... Yet...America’s government was, for Melville, far from ideal....

We are led to conclude, I think, that, on one fictional level, the narrator’s spacious abode was meant to represent America—and his chimney, the federal Union. Moreover, if we recall that the narrator is both the archetypal conservative and a man determined, above all, to protect his chimney, then we are also encouraged to look into American history for a ‘Unionist’ politician to whom the narrator might correspond. Perhaps our most likely choice is New England’s illustrious Daniel Webster, a thorough conservative and, more importantly, the man recognized by most Americans of Melville’s day as the premier ‘Protector of the Union’ and the ‘Defender’ of its legal base, the Constitution... One of [Webster’s] greatest rhetorical triumphs occurred in June 1825, when he presented the chief address at the ceremonies held to honor the start of the construction on the Bunker Hill Monument.... He and the monument stood, individually and together, as symbols of American nationalistic feeling....

The monument allusion, carefully immersed in a flood of ‘pro-chimney’ rhetoric, was apparently Melville’s way of linking the narrator’s chimney *and* rhetoric to American nationalism—and the narrator himself to Webster, a preeminent public sponsor of that nationalism.... Nationalist sentiments were

continually under fire from Southern secessionists and Northern abolitionists, bitter foes joined by their opposition to Webster's Union and portrayed in Melville's allegory by the narrator's 'destructive' spouse and her chief cohort, the conniving Mr. Scribe.... The narrator's spouse...in particular...seems to stand for the liberated females who participated in American abolitionism and who vigorously persecuted ('high above all') that political Union so sacred to Websterian conservatives....

Melville may have suspected that the female members of the abolition movement, most of whom were simultaneously involved in the fight for women's rights, were devoted not primarily to the war against slavery but to the struggle against male domination of American politics. He may have realized that beneath the violence of the disunion debate in New England lay a sexual contest of equal, if not greater, significance.... [The narrator] serves as a necessary brake for her locomotive-like progressivism. In effect, 'I and My Chimney' is not the story of two destructively polarized perspectives but instead a tale which pictures for us the symbiotic and well-ordered relationship that has often come to exist between the conservative and progressive minds.... Melville's representative conservative and his progressive spouse will oppose each other forever, and perhaps for that very reason Melville felt their thoroughly American 'house' would stand....

Melville's Mr. Scribe appears, in part, to be an ironic caricature of Garrison and Phillips, 'scribes' (that is, polemical writers) who joined with the progressive females of America to deny the patriotic values of Webster and the nationalists. Their opposition to Webster's Union developed as a result of that Union's willingness to condone slavery. In 1845 one motto of Garrison's *Liberator* became 'No Union with Slaveholders,' and henceforth he bombarded America's chimney.... Regardless of Melville's distaste for abolitionist politics, he seems to have agreed with Garrison and Phillips on the subject of the potential conflict between political and religious loyalties....

Like the narrator's wife and Mr. Scribe, Garrison was uncompromising, then, in his efforts to 'throw down,' as a 'mighty obstacle' to moral progress, that political structure which his Unionist opponents held dear.... Yet if Scribe stands for the abolitionists, he can also be linked to the Southern theorists of disunion, those fire-eating politicians who had long felt that the South would be financially better off detached from an industrial North with alien views on such subjects as slavery... Scribe...hastily urges the chimney's demolition after only a few quick calculations....

In his tales, Melville typically employed first-person narration not in order to voice his own views but to portray more fully certain mentalities which he found unsatisfactory.... Webster and the nationalists were prone to minister to their government in a way more becoming of monarchists than liberty-loving souls.... Melville questions Webster's piety...the perils of 'patriotic idolatry'... What had begun with those Pilgrims so revered by Webster as a government designed to focus the attention of Americans upon certain fundamental theological truths had become, by 1856, itself an object of veneration.... The narrator, who is the too-staunch defender of a chimney with rather obvious disadvantages, has some failings of his own."

Allan Moore Emery
"The Political Significance of Melville's Chimney"
The New England Quarterly LV.2 (June 1982)

"While still in Pittsfield, Melville was already under such a strain that Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, who has an early interest in psychiatry, had been called in to examine him—an episode that Melville satirized in the story 'I and My Chimney'.... The narrator...is a contentedly slow and backward old man who says: 'In a dream I go about my fields, a sort of lazy, happy-go-lucky, good-for-nothing, loafing, old Lear.' He is beset by an enterprising wife who wants him to demolish the celebrated but useless oversized chimney which dominates everything in the house: 'From this habitual precedence of my chimney over me, some even think that I have got into a sad rearward way altogether; in short, from standing behind my old-fashioned chimney so much, I have got to be quite behind the age, too, as well as running behind-hand in everything else.' When a Mr. Scribe is called in to estimate the cost of removing the chimney, he discovers that there is a 'secret chamber, or closet' in it. The more the wife insists on having the chimney 'abolished,' the more the old man is determined to keep his old chimney just as it is."

Alfred Kazin

*An American Procession:
The Major American Writers from 1830-1930*
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Michael Hollister (2014)