

ANALYSIS

“The Lightning-Rod Man” (1853)

Herman Melville

(1819-1891)

“Attack on commercialism.... A lightning-rod salesman cringes at the sound of thunder and yet offers for profit freedom from fear of lightning in the form of the lightning rod. Coming in the middle of a lightning storm, he preys upon the fears of other, hoping that the nearness of the storm will increase his sales. The ineffectiveness of man’s efforts to free himself from natural dangers is seen in the fear-ridden life of the lightning-rod man in contrast with the dignity of the narrator, who recognizes nature’s power and takes his chances without fear. It is seen also in the contrast between the destructiveness of the lightning bolt and the seeming impossibility that a short length of metal rod should channel that destructive power. The lightning rod, symbol of man’s progress against nature, seems a puny thing to guard against being struck by lightning, the Biblical symbol of God’s wrath. This successful balance and contrast of symbols make ‘The Lightning-Rod Man’ one of Melville’s best short stories.”

Charles G. Hoffmann

“The Shorter Fiction of Herman Melville”

The South Atlantic Quarterly 52 (July 1953) 414-30

“At first glance this short tale seems to be an amusing but uncomplicated account of the attempt by a salesman of lightning rods to sell his wares to the sales-resistant narrator while a terrific thunder storm rages around the house. In 1853 householders in the Pittsfield region had gone daft over lightning rods, as the result of a strenuous advertising campaign. According to family legend, Melville was visited by one of the salesmen and based his story on this encounter.

But this story has a subsurface meaning. Melville is satirizing ministers of the Calvinist persuasion who preach hell-fire and damnation while at the same time they exhort their congregations to buy a lightning rod (conversion to Christianity) in order to escape God’s wrath. The narrator’s (and Melville’s) position is stated at the end of the story. ‘The hairs of our heads are numbered, and the days of our lives. In thunder as in sunshine, I stand at ease in the hands of my God. False negotiator, away! See, the scroll of the storm is rolled back; the house is unharmed; and in the blue heavens I read in the rainbow that the Deity will not, of purpose, make war on man’s earth.’”

Willard Thorp

Afterword

Billy Budd and Other Tales

(NAL/Signet 1961) 329

“One of Melville’s slightest stories is a narrative relating how a lightning-rod salesman makes a professional call upon a householder during a thunderstorm.... If the story is a satirical attack upon an arrogant man, it may show us Melville challenging one of the prominent defenders of orthodox Calvinism. The Rev. Mr. John Todd, minister of the First Christ Church (Congregational) of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, has many parallels to Melville’s salesman as a means to avoid the divine thunderbolt. Todd preached fire and brimstone... He preached heaven and hell and...sin and depravity... On one occasion a girl attending an all-day preaching service of his and felt so keenly that he had been preaching particularly at her that she cut her throat.... Todd had a pig named for him at Groton....

Lightning not only struck the great elm tree in the Pittsfield park on two separate occasions but it also struck the Congregational Church of which Todd was the minister (but before his pastorate there) in a spectacular display at a time when the church was occupied by about three hundred persons. The thunderer displayed his ability to hurl the fiery bolts in the vicinity where protection from divine anger was the theological theme. On Sunday evening September 6, 1835, while a prayer meeting was in session in the lecture room of the Congregational Church, lightning struck. The lightning rod had become detached from

the building and swung loose, a situation similar to one commented on in Melville's story, where the salesman asserts that the workman who installed the rod was at fault—not the rod itself.

The lightning, avoiding the defective rod, 'entered the lecture-room between the first and second windows...followed the pipe to the chimney at the west end of the house; descended it until it met the stovepipe in the lower room; thence followed the pipe north to the stove in the northwest lower room, where it tore its way through the floor, and passed out through the underpinning; leaving a visible trace of its irresistible course in the earth outside...' It was a wonderful and awesome display of fiery power before the frightened eyes of the three hundred worshipers, several of whom were severely injured.... This lightning-struck building of First Christ Church burned on January 9, 1851....

The salesman talks with assurance of the nature of lightning and its habits as well as the places and times and means of avoiding it (getting wet, or baptism, helps); but at the same time his manner and his words as well give him a paltry and cowardly character in contrast to the householder who is not certain—except that he will not 'buy' the view presented to him."

Egbert S. Oliver
Studies in American Literature
(Eurasia/Ram Nagar, New Delhi 1965) 71, 74-75, 77

Michael Hollister (2015)