

ANALYSIS

“The Paradise of Bachelors and The Tartarus of Maids” (1855)

Herman Melville

(1819-1891)

“A trick of juxtaposition, pairing off contrasts of wealth and poverty, American and English customs, man’s lot and woman’s, is utilized...most suggestively by ‘The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,’ the latter a guided tour through a paper mill...which can manufacture a sheet of blank paper in nine minutes by a process minutely parallel to that of child-bearing.”

Harry Levin

The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville
(Knopf/Vintage 1960) 188

“Melville had historical justification for using women factory operatives as symbols of deadening modern labor in ‘The Tartarus of Maids,’ in which the narrator is stunned by his first sight as he enters a New England paper factory: ‘At rows of blank-looking counters sat rows of blank-looking girls, with blank, white folders in their blank hands, all blankly folding blank paper’.... For more than two decades before this a body of American authors had depicted the trials and triumphs of American working women. ‘The Tartarus of Maids’ was a literary culmination of a rich tradition of fiction about women factory workers. In the early going, this fiction was relatively benign. The heroine of Sarah Savage’s *The Factory Girl* (1814) cheerfully does her job in a cotton factory in the happy knowledge that hard work is an ennobling activity for women... This positive tone also characterizes certain stories in general magazines, such as Mrs. Joseph C. Neal’s ‘The New England Factory Girl’ (*Graham’s Magazine*, 1848), which depicts a woman who pays for her brother’s education by working for three years in a Lowell factory.”

David S. Reynolds

*Beneath the American Renaissance:
The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*
(Harvard 1989) 352-53

“Perhaps more than any other writer, Herman Melville has been perceived as *the* American master of male bonding... But while his work often features a male couple or fraternity, Melville’s depiction of the bond cannot be read as simple affirmation, especially his exploration of 1855, ‘The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids.’ Here, in a paradigmatic rendering of the ideological structures of gender, class, and race underlying the male bond, Melville is far more skeptical than in his earlier works... The bond is frequently envisioned as culturally innocent, beyond the reaches of civilization, on ships, in forests, on deserted islands, across long empty prairies—all those place Huck was seeking when he lit out with Jim for the territory.... While women’s exclusion operates as the bond’s basic ideological assumption, Melville’s diptych is particularly important in capturing the changing patriarchal economy of the nineteenth century, its transformation of women’s labor from compulsory reproduction to factory production....

The idyllic world of men together—appropriately called Paradise—is depicted in its seeming disconnection to the industrial nightmare of Tartarus, the frozen landscape of dominated and doomed women. Through the confluence of these segregated spheres, the diptych quite stunningly reveals how the rhetoric of the male bond is forged across a discourse of sexual difference.... Melville exposes the bond’s reiteration of a privileged masculine perspective...creating...an unreliable narrator...preventing any equation of the narrator’s perspective with Melville’s own.... The diptych captures the ideological compatibility of the class and slave systems, their necessity in maintaining the privileged realm of the bachelor paradise.... The two halves of Melville’s diptych thus exist as gendered evocations of the same economy; what initially appear as separate male and female worlds are in fact the product of homogenizing masculine point of view, one that constructs democracy and equality only in the privileged space of a masculine paradise.”

Robyn Wiegman

“Melville’s Geography of Gender”
American Literary History 1.4
(Oxford 1989) 735-53

Michael Hollister (2015)