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Though I had little prior knowledge of his work, I chose to analyze Herman Melville's collection of short stories, *The Piazza Tales*, for Professor Gallagher's Nineteenth Century American Literature course. The main goal of our assignment was to identify the author's attitudes toward various aspects of nineteenth century American society, but with Melville this proved a daunting task. I discovered what most appealed to me was his ability to present layers of meaning within seemingly simple stories and to obscure the significance of many elements until the very end, where the conclusion often presents a key to the larger truth. I found these stories were actually more fun to analyze than to read!

According to my father, a writer and soon-to-be English teacher, writing is in my blood. Since I'm already an English major, whose jobs and extra-curricular activities all revolve around writing, I suppose he's right. Of course the writing process is often painful—I enjoy brainstorming and editing far more than the actual writing—but I am also occasionally pleased with my results. For example, I liked writing this paper because it forced me to synthesize so much information.

## The Piazza Tales: Melville's Critique of Nineteenth Century America

Herman Melville, one of the most important American writers in the nineteenth century, authored several short stories but published only one collection—*The Piazza Tales*, a set of six pieces that have had tremendous literary and social impact. The collection includes, in order, "The Piazza," "Bartleby the Scrivener," "Benito Cereno," "The Lightning-Rod Man," "The Encantadas," and "The Bell-Tower," and although several stories are not set in America, each comments on some aspect of American society and culture. By the mid-1850s when these stories were written, Melville was "writing from the depths." As the success of his earlier works rapidly diminished, his

social criticism and pessimism had grown more pronounced,[1] but from this dilemma sprang one of the most intriguing elements of his work. These six stories reveal Melville's duality at its best—on one level they are intriguing narratives for popular appeal, but below the surface lies the author's strong social criticism. In *The Piazza Tales*, Herman Melville compels his readers to acknowledge and realistically address the problems of illusion versus reality, slavery, the Industrial Revolution, and organized religion in nineteenth century American society.

One element that runs through each of the stories is Melville's commitment to the pursuit of truth. Melville had contempt for idealized optimism, and although his attitudes toward society became more pessimistic later in life, he continued to advocate social justice and reform.[2] According to Willard Thorp, Melville became a major literary figure because of his ability to "say 'No' in an age which demanded that all good citizens should say 'Yes.'"[3] He addressed issues that everyone else wanted to ignore, dredged up the skeletons of the nation's past, pointed out the flaws in the current social and political trends, and foreshadowed the inevitably negative consequences of ignoring these problems.

Melville believed that the world in which he lived was a "fallen world." This idea is the backbone of his perception of the reality of human existence: mankind and the natural world will always fall short of the ideal, whether or not this ideal ever actually existed, for only in a fallen world could the

atrocities of humanity and nature occur.[4] This theme arises in each story but is explicitly expressed in "The Encantadas." In the opening scenes as the horrible, hellish landscape is described, Melville says, "In no world but a fallen one could such lands exist."[5] This "Plutonian" setting becomes the stage for human suffering and despair. Several critics agree that the Encantadas Islands are a metaphor for the human experience on earth. The hierarchy of Rock Rodondo recalls Dante's rings of Hell, while several references to Tartarus—including the Greek word for tortoise: *tartaruchos*—and references to mythological and literary characters of the Underworld provide additional support for Melville's portrayal of the Encantadas as a fallen, hell-on-earth world.[6] Each additional story in *The Piazza Tales* also asserts the fallibility of mankind and the perils of nature.

After first establishing the "true" nature of the world in which we exist, Melville emphasizes the dangers of allowing illusion to limit our ability to perceive this truth. Each short story deals with the problem of illusion versus reality. In "Benito Cereno," for instance, Captain Delano is a naive American with preconceptions and misconceptions about the situation on *The San Dominick*, and he thus grossly misinterprets the state of affairs on the ship. Delano's boundless faith in mankind nearly costs him his life and his own ship.[7] He also has romantic ideals about slavery and justice, and Melville shows that while ideals are black and white, the reality is complex and often there can be no clear justice.[8] Another misleading setting is the

isles of "The Encantadas," which exemplify duality, contradiction, deception, illusion, and delusion.  Like the trick of the mythological sirens, many ships are fooled into thinking these isles are a haven when, in reality, they become a Hell.[9] They are home to the tortoise, a creature of duality with a dark exterior but a hidden light side.  The Encantadas are also home to several characters with dual personalities—the buccaneers, who raped and pillaged yet retreated to the islands for the peace and tranquility "they denied to every civilized harbor in that part of the world."[10]

In the collection's opening story, "The Piazza," the narrator learns a difficult lesson about the disparity between appearance and reality.  The enchanted "fairy-land" of his imagination is in stark contrast to the actual run-down, decaying cottage inhabited by the unhappy young woman.  Like the narrator, she perceives no beauty from within but looks only afar to distant imagined bliss.  The irony of this story is that both the narrator and Marianna are blind to their own circumstances, and it is easier to fantasize about perfection than to face the reality.[11] In "Bartleby the Scrivener," the lawyer's constant attempts to rationalize Bartleby's odd behavior show how far society will go to maintain our self-delusions.[12]

In each of these stories, Melville warns against the dangers of delusion and the concealment of truth.  It follows, therefore, that Melville wants his readers to recognize the importance of challenging the illusion, pursuing the reality, and finding new sources for faith and truth.  In "The Piazza," the

narrator chooses the north side to build his piazza, for despite the fact that it is the harshest and most challenging direction, it is also the most rewarding.[13] In "The Lightning-Rod Man," the narrator challenges the logic of his guest's argument, rejects his proposal, and attempts to discern the true nature of the unexpected visit. The narrator in this short piece is the only one throughout these stories capable of comprehending the ambiguous nature of the world around him and perceiving the truth amidst the illusions. Melville's characters eventually learn the folly of ignoring reality and pursuing "fairy tales" and take responsibility for their individual choices. This serves as a lesson for society to take a realistic look at its own flaws and take responsibility for rectifying its more grievous errors.

By emphasizing the pursuit of truth and reality, Melville encourages readers to critically evaluate American politics, culture, values, and attitudes. Critics note that Melville's work generates controversy because he shows that America is not indisputably the best, challenging the mind-set of American superiority still prevalent today.[14] "Benito Cereno" evaluates the emergence of young America as a world power and the nation's role in global politics. Each central character in "Benito Cereno" represents an aspect of world politics: Benito Cereno, from the traditional European Spanish culture, represents the Old World; Captain Delano, the optimistic and foolhardy American, clearly portrays the New World; and some critics

propose that Babo, the leader of the rebel slaves, represents the Third World.[15]

The interaction between the American Delano and the other two characters reveals America's relationship with other world powers in the nineteenth century. Delano treats the Spanish ship with condescension, subtly exerting his cultural superiority.[16] He expresses sympathy for the Spaniard's unfashionable clothing, his foolish superstitions, his uncouth manners, and his lack of control over his ship.[17] According to one critic, because of the way Captain Delano controls his ship, *The Bachelor's Delight*, he can only assume that Don Cereno, as a European among Africans, would also be in control of his own ship.[18] The American's misconceptions and stereotypes make it easy for Babo to fool the Captain about the true state of affairs. Delano assumes that blacks are too docile and ignorant to overpower a crew of Europeans, that Cereno has power because he has legal authority to control the ship, and that the *San Dominick* could not survive without his valiant rescue and assistance. Critics agree that Delano's unconscious presumptions hinder his ability to understand other cultures, and because America does not suffer the burden of the past to the same extent as Europe and Africa, Delano has many romantic ideals about the way the world works.[19] For example, he believes that blacks are "naturally" suited for slavery: "There is something in the negro which, in a peculiar way, fits him for avocations about one's person...Captain Delano took to

negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs."[20] Once Delano's preconceptions have been shattered about the nature of the black rebels, he relentlessly pursues the *San Dominick* to ensure justice when no such justice is possible because such horrible wrongs have been committed on both sides.[21]

Even in the mid-nineteenth century, America was emerging as the indisputable leader of world politics. When both Benito Cereno and Babo jump into Captain Delano's boat, the American single-handedly overpowers them both.[22] Melville is criticizing America for its unchecked power and simplistic view of the world. He shows that America is on a dangerous path, not only concerning international issues but also internally. According to *The Piazza Tales,* the major internal flaws of American society are the injustice of slavery, the dangers of industrialization, and religious hypocrisy.

Melville considered slavery the greatest evil in American society, even though "Benito Cereno" reveals the horrors of slavery, interestingly enough, from a white man's perspective. Cereno's experiences with the slave revolt and his subjugation to the blacks kill his optimism, kill his spirit, and finally kill his body.[23] In the world of slavery on this ship, there is no compassion, no joy, and no justice. Human enslavement is also a recurring theme in "The Encantadas," for two monstrous human inhabitants of these hellish isles, Oberlus and the Dog-King, capture other men and force them into body- and soul-breaking servitude. In "The Encantadas," the events truly

seem fitting for the setting because slavery is so cruel and unnatural a punishment it should only occur in Hell, not in a civilized, modern world.

"Benito Cereno" also presents a chilling picture of the inevitable effects of keeping a human race enslaved. "Natural law" ultimately takes over, and oppressed men rise up to claim their natural rights and punish their oppressors.[24] Because all civilized means of ensuring equality have been denied, they must rely on violence to guarantee freedom. Yet, as critic Nicholas Canaday points out, even when blacks gain power, they are still denied authority to exercise that power because this right must be granted by society.[25] In "Benito Cereno," the conflict between authority and power is exemplified in Cereno and Babo, for Cereno has legal authority but no power, and Babo has power but no authority. However, this raises a controversy over Babo as a heroic figure. At the story's end, Delano considers Babo an evil rebel who caused much strife for the Spaniards and deserves punishment for his wrongdoings. Yet Babo was merely reacting against the gross inequality of his circumstances and can be considered a cunning, empowering leader who helped free the blacks from their oppression. Even the heartless murder of Benito Cereno's friend and former captain, Alexandro Aranda, is "a justifiable political statement" in the pursuit of personal freedom. While the captain lived, the blacks could never be free.[26] Through characters like Babo and Benito Cereno, Melville shows the

complexity of the slavery situation and criticizes the simple American "good versus evil" attitude.

Melville believed that as long as slavery and unjustifiable violence were permitted in America, "the Declaration of Independence is a lie." He rejected the three creeds of the American Revolution—Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity—because they were denied to a large portion of the population of this "free and equal" nation.[27] James E. Miller notes the hypocrisy of America in "Benito Cereno," for Delano claims to empathize with the blacks and preaches love and compassion, yet he sees nothing wrong with the enslavement of an entire race.[28] Most Americans of the nineteenth century denied the wrongs being committed against blacks. When Benito Cereno jumps into Delano's ship, he does so not to save his own life but to prevent Delano from becoming a victim of the reality as well.[29] Reiterating the necessity of understanding the true nature of mankind and society, Melville shows that ignorance is more dangerous than understanding, even though reality may be painful. In "The Bell-Tower," there is a single flaw in the bell because a man is sacrificed during the casting, which ultimately causes the bell's destruction. Melville is perhaps suggesting that the weakness in America's Liberty Bell is the gross injustice of slavery and the sacrifice of humanity for national progress and prosperity.[30]

A second form of "slavery" Melville criticizes is the Industrial Revolution and its effects on humanity and society. Various motives for

Industrialization are discussed in "The Bell-Tower." Banadonna, the inventor, is building the Bell Tower as a sort of Tower of Babel to challenge the heavens. Built by the hands of men, the Tower rises 300 feet in the air, rivaling the mountains, the natural creations of God. Banadonna is motivated by pride and power—the power of science over nature, the power of reason over superstition, and the power of man over God. Banadonna wanted "to solve nature, to steal into her, to intrigue beyond her, to procure some one else to bind her to his hand...to rival her, outstrip her, and rule her."[31] He rejected superstitions and supposed limitations and set out to challenge, create, and conquer. Yet there is no compassion, no art, no life in his creations.[32] He sacrifices a human life for the sake of progress and production. This fatal flaw in the bell can also be interpreted as the humanity sacrificed for the progress of factories in industrialized America. These volatile values echo the motives of the Industrial Revolution: progress at any cost. The story's concluding lines, "So the creator was killed by the creature. So the bell was too heavy for the tower...And so pride went before the fall,"[33] clearly illustrate the dangers of America's path to progress.

According to critic Marvin Fisher, the two American dilemmas which arise in Melville's work are "unquestioning faith in technological progress, and man's domination of the processes of life and enslavement of lesser beings."[34] In "The Bell-Tower," Banadonna creates Haman, a soulless, mechanical slave, to replace human labor. One interpretation of the slave's

name includes "half-man," for this creature looks and acts as a man but has no soul or emotions. Haman is also the villain in the Book of Esther who tried to enslave the Jews, and connections have even been drawn to "Hamo," the enslaved race in Melville's earlier book *Mardi*.[35] The slavery in this story is the slavery of the North in the United States, parallel to the slavery of blacks in the South. In "The Bell-Tower," as in the North, men become victims of their creations.

In "Bartleby, the Scrivener," men also become "walled-in" by the development of society. Bartleby is trapped by his job at the Dead-Letter Office, but he is also confined in the lawyer's office, walled in by additional "high green folding screens" within the room, where his only windows afford him a view of more walls. Eventually Bartleby is trapped in prison,[36] and in each case these walls represent the man-made limitations and conformity which society imposes upon the individual. According to Melville's personal experience, the writer is trapped as well. As critic Michael Paul Rogin points out, after slavery, walls replace the whip to enforce social restrictions on the individual. As this version of "morality" becomes internalized, the soul dies. Bartleby becomes a veritable slave, copying documents endlessly for no gain or goal of his own and punished by society when he attempts to throw off this yoke.[37] Bartleby's only escape is death, yet his death propagates spiritual awakening for another, because Bartleby forces the narrator to recognize his own spiritual emptiness. The Industrial Revolution deteriorates

family ties, social identity, and the value of the individual. Melville provides even stronger criticism of the Industrial Revolution in other short stories like "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," where young women become the victims of dehumanizing factory labor.

Another social aspect Melville challenged was religion, specifically Christianity. In his own life, Melville rejected the Bible and organized religion, yet many of his works draw upon Christian theology and Biblical references; for example, the damned sons of Noah in "The Bell-Tower" show the futility of Banadonna's project, and the Dantean rings and the demonic characters in "The Encantadas" clearly portray the evil, hellish nature of the islands.[38] The imagery for the latter supports Melville's concept of the aforementioned "fallen world," and perhaps Melville's rejection of God was based on the injustice and evil he saw and experienced.

Several characters in *The Piazza Tales* directly challenge God and religion. Banadonna boldly rivals God's power and authority by building the highest and grandest tower, but he also creates Haman and becomes almost God-like himself. Another story, "The Lightning-Rod Man," shows one "enlightened" individual's rejection of religious doctrine in favor of science and reason. The Lightning-Rod man sells lightning-rods, symbolizing "a peculiarly American blend of science and salvation"[39] when he encourages the narrator to put his faith in the rod and staff (referencing Psalm 23) and to accept the "one true rod."[40] Even though the peddler claims he provides

a "new and improved" lightning rod, this new package masks the same old creed: conversions through fear, rooted in superstition rather than truth or reason.[41] In a peculiar twist, the narrator in this story rejects the religious doctrine being forced upon him because he has faith in a benevolent God "who will not, of purpose, make war on man's earth."[42] Whether Melville is rejecting all possibility of God's existence or simply the destructive nature of missionary Christianity, he emphasizes the challenge against superstition and traditional beliefs to discover truth.

Melville challenges the faith element of religion, for he believed that most people rely on religion as a safeguard from reality. Two stories specifically address the disillusionment resulting from Christian faith. In "The Encantadas," the islands seem a welcome paradise to travelers, but appearances prove deceptive when the visitors find they are actually in Tartarus. In "The Piazza," the narrator envisions a far-off magical paradise, free from the world's trials and offering a reprieve from pain and hardship. The reality he finds, however, falls far short of his expectations. In addition to the inherent restrictions of blind faith on the pursuit of truth, Melville feared that God-reliance over self-reliance prevented men from taking responsibility for improving their environment. Furthermore, Melville criticized the hypocrisy of Christianity, primarily for permitting slavery to exist while preaching love and equality.

Though not well received during Melville's lifetime, *The Piazza Tales* provided a valid criticism of American culture and values in the nineteenth century and helped to guarantee their author's lasting importance. Melville advocated social reform in several areas: through the abolition of slavery, a reevaluation of the effects of the Industrial Revolution, and the reform of organized religion. To these ends, Melville wrote on two levels—the surface level for the general public, and the deeper meaning for the more discerning reader. Most importantly, Melville writes the truth and urges his readers to appreciate reality, to reconsider American ideals, and to take responsibility for change.

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[1] Harold Bloom, ed., *Modern Critical Interpretations: Herman Melville's Billy Budd, "Benito Cereno," "Bartleby the Scrivener," and Other Tales* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 2.
[2] Barry Phillips, "'The Good Captain': Amasa Delano, American Idealist," in *A Benito Cereno Handbook*, ed. Seymour L. Gross (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1965), 114.
[3] Willard Thorp, *Herman Melville* (Chicago: American Book Company, 1938), xcvii.
[4] Marvin Fisher, *Going Under: Melville's Short Fiction and the American 1850* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 25.
[5] Herman Melville, *Piazza Tales*, ed. Egbert S. Oliver (New York: Hendricks House, Farrar Straus, 1948), 151.
[6] Fisher, 30.
[7] Nicholas Canaday, Jr., "Captain Delano and the Problem of Authority," in *A Benito Cereno Handbook*, ed. Seymour L. Gross (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1965), 105.
[8] Phillips, 114.
[9] Fisher, 42.
[10] Melville, 172.
[11] Fisher, 15.
[12] Michael Clark, "Witches and Wall Street: Possession is Nine-Tenths of the Law," in *Modern Critical Interpretations: Herman Melville's Billy Budd, "Benito Cereno," "Bartleby the Scrivener," and Other Tales*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 138.
[13] Fisher, 21.
[14] Thorp, xcvii.
[15] Fisher, 106.
[16] Fisher, 111.
[17] Melville, 68-76.
[18] Canaday, 105.

[19] Fisher, 113.
[20] Melville, 99-100.
[21] Phillips, 114.
[22] Fisher, 111.
[23] Phillips, 115.
[24] Fisher, 96.
[25] Canaday, 106-107.
[26] Fisher, 108.
[27] Thorp, cvi-cvii.
[28] James E. Miller, Jr., "Amasa Delano, Realist," in *A Benito Cereno Handbook*, ed. Seymour L. Gross (Belmont California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., Inc., 1965), 110.
[29] Phillips, 115.
[30] Fisher, 102.
[31] Melville, 220.
[32] Bloom, 2.
[33] Melville, 223.
[34] Fisher, 95.
[35] Fisher, 99.
[36] Leo Marx, "Melville's Parable of the Walls," in *Modern Critical Interpretations: Herman Melville's Billy Budd, "Benito Cereno," "Bartleby the Scrivener," and Other Tales*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 23.
[37] Michael Paul Rogin, "Melville and the Slavery of the North," in *Modern Critical Interpretations: Herman Melville's Billy Budd, "Benito Cereno," "Bartleby the Scrivener," and Other Tales*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 107-110.
[38] Bloom, 2.
[39] Fisher, 121.
[40] Melville, 144.
[41] Fisher, 119.
[42] Melville, 148.