

# Conflict Between Good and Evil in Melville's Novels

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"Though it was apparent that he possessed the mind of an Aspiring ambitious order, full of elastic energy and illuminated by rich colours of poetic fancy, he was evidently a disappointed man, shot by criticism and disgusted with the civilized world and with our Christendom in general and particular."(1)

In 1859, two Williams College students, Titus Munson Coan and John Thomas Gullick made their literary pilgrimage to the house of Melville at Pittsfield. As the sons of Hawaiian missionaries they were critical of Melville. Caon wrote to his mother that shade of Aristotle rose like a cold mist between him and Fayaway. Gulick recorded in a journal that the energy and dignity of Homeric time afforded the only state of humanity individual or social. He disapproved the thinking of Melville who thought that there was little meaning in the religions of the present day that had come down from Plato. The lines above quoted are the views of Gulick about Melville who refused to talk about his adventure and shut himself up as a cloistered thinker.

Melville calls himself a 'pondring' man while people evaluate him a mariner and a mystic or sailor, philosopher and poet. He is the combination of all these elements. His works no doubt present the voyages of people on strange seas but they also project the inner voyage of soul in this dark world and wide where ignorant armies clash by night.

In 1950 Melville went on to describe that microcosm of evil in White Jacket and posed the rhetorical question, what separates the enlightened man from the savage? Is civilization of thing distinct or is it an advanced stage of barbarism. 17 years after his induction into the primitive community of the Typees the public lectures delivered on the subject is still contrasted there is kindly and hospitable nature to that of there would be civilizers as the most barbarous, treacherous and devilish creatures on earth.

The conflict between good and evil begins with the first works of melville where the author finds ironical contradictions between the pagans and so-called religious Christians. He later makes it quite clear even in Moby Dick that a good Pagon is better than a corrupt Christian. His life time religion is the religion of man. In Typee he bitterly castigates the anglo-sexon race for

its forcible propagation of Christianity at the point of gun. Evil cannot be defended whether it is committed by Pagans or whites. He writes:--

"The anglo-saxon have exterminated Paganism from the greater part of North American continent but with it they have likewise exterminated the great portion of the Red -Race."(2)

These lines describe the heinous racial exploitation of the Pagan Peoples by the so called civilized Christian Europeans. Melville indulges in a heavy dose of irony piercing the hypocrisy of Christian so transform the innocent and good Pagans into the beast of burdens, without changing the heart. Thus the zealous preaching of the gospel in Polynesian islands without any sincere change of heart is a shame and tyrannical exercise in futility.

"Not until I visited Honolulu was I aware of the fact that the small remnant of the natives had been civilized into drab houses and evangelised into the beast of burden."( 3)

Melville's creative vision is rooted in ionic knowledge of essential sameness of Christians and savages images the resulting uniformity of human life and has the impossibility of escaping its privations and hardships in describing the perilous journey through the wilderness in search of Paradise. The International Dissertation Abstract (volume 43, number 08, Feb. 1983) observes Melville's faith in essential goodness of a man above all religions of the world.

"Melville offers his own allegorical interpretation of the myth of the fall and he characterizes the archetypal leap of faith of man's attempt to escape the dangers and demands of human condition. Melville does not bear a serious view of religion finally in analysing the religious protection of a heathen and primitive people. Melville confesses his view of religion as a diversion by which men distract themselves from fear and frustration of the world."(4)

Melville regards to the moral life as a two valued proposition; either we live by Christ's assumptions of good in man or by Satan's assumption of evil."(5) Many of the authors he read in his later years and in whose books he left the trail of his pencil give the glimpse of contradiction in his soul. When he read in the arch optimist Emerson 'Trust men and they will be true to you', he

commented in the margin, 'God help the poor fellow who squares his life according to this.' For him world is an assembly of fools and knaves and The Satanic morality is a virtual paraphrase of the way of the world.

20th century critics predominantly take Redburn as "a study of delusion of Innocence confronted with the world of Ideal sheltered by facts."(6) The novel presents the first person narrative of the young narrator Welling Borough Redburn who goes to the sea at the age of 15. He is the symbol of Innocence for Melville. The *Highlanders* sails in early June. Soon Redburn, wretched with hunger, is ordered to perform demeaning and dangerous duties, clearing the shapes pig pin and climbing aloft to slush down the topmost. For his ignorance of shipboard hit subjected to dericive abuse from the crew and he is assigned humiliating duties by the mate soon after the voyage begins, drunken sailor rashes on back and shrieking and jumps to death in the sea.

And Jackson, a small sickly seaman who horofies the crew and whom Redburn later comes to believe to be an absolute evil threatens to kill the boy. The features of Jackson reminds the characters of Charles Dickens. He "swore terribly if anyone ventured to question what he asserted on that head."(7) He is a queer bully being the best seamen on the board. Redburn recollects:--

"Did you ever see a man with his hair shaved off and just recovered from the yellow fever?... His nose had broken down in the middle, and he squinted with one eye and did not look very straight out of the other."(8)

Bodily Jackson is the weakest Man of the cruel as much as redburn a boy of 15 would have thrown him down.

The pure sensibility of the boy is repelled by the horrible representation of slavery trade. He feels the urgent need of its abolition. Because of the slavery, the sons, the husband were separated from their dear ones. For young Redburn in his school of life, it is not only a step from the personal corruption of one hopeless sailor to the mass corruption of civilized society. Accordingly, the important lesson in Redburn's education is man's inhumanity to man. For nearly a hundred pages or the centered part of the book the boy is allowed to roam the docks and streets of Liverpool, digesting his nearly indigestible expression of squalor and vice that had appaled Melville.

Newton in his book Herman Melville applies the mythic method "to the interpretation of Redburn, the central theme of Redburn is concerned in some way with the initiation of innocence in to evil."(9)

Through Redburn, Melville evaluates the character of Satan in Milton's Paradise Lost. He calls Milton 'our high priest of poetry', "who only enhances it that such unmitigated evil for his material, he should build up his most goodly structure."(10) Milton had to deal with Satan Lucifer as the personification of the evil in essence. Redburn feels that Milton breathes heroic energy in to the spirit of Satan so as to make him an archtypal figure of a rebel in the early book of Paradise Lost.

With goodness Melville deals with the theme of gentility. Redburn befriends Harry Bolton the gentlemanly Englishman. Both are well born and come from a relatively sheltered background. Both suffer from illusion being encouraged by the captain's sympathetic concern, not later they are rudely treated by the officers and crew. On the other hand Harry and Jackson both are in some way isolated figures. Both are careless about their own survival and security. Both Harry and Jackson have attraction for Redburn. Most significantly both Jackson and Harry Bolton meet watery graves in similar fashion. Most important Jackson represents the lowest, hardest and coarsest element about the Highlanders, Harry with his fine, girlish beauty and voice like a bird represents, the highest, softest and finest.

Melville points the epic battle between Captain Ahab and The White Whale as a religious, holy war, a sort of crusade by men against the British force and the evil energy of waters in Moby Dick. Like the great message of Bhagwat Geeta man is advised to keep equal temperature of Mind reflecting the spiritual equilibrium. Melville stresses the need for cultivating human values.

## References:--

1. Leon Howard, Herman melville :A Biography, (Berkely University Of California press; 1951), page 263.
2. Herman Melville, Typee, (New York : Grosset and Dunlop; nd.), page 196..
3. Ibid, page 198.
4. Loc Cit.
5. Edward H. Rosenberry, Melville, (London :Routledge and kegan Paul; 1979), page 52.
6. Quasimuddin Khan Philosophical Themes in the Major Novels of Herman melville, Delhi Doaba Publication; 2001), page 70.
7. Ibid page 72.
8. Melville, Redburn, (New York: Richard R. Smith Inc.;1930), page 72.
9. Arwin Newton, Herman Melville, (New York: Saloana; 1950), page 103.
10. Redburn, PP. 356 - 57.

