

American Literature & Culture
Prof. Aysha Iqbal Vishwamohan
Department of Humanities and Social Science
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras
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Herma Melville A Brief Overview (Lecture 12a)

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Good morning, so we will talk about Herman Melville who lived between 1819 to 1891, the author of Moby Dick, his most well-known works but also the author of Billy Budd, Typee, Omoo, all these are nautical novels or stories about the seafarers. He also wrote a famous short story or a novella, Bartleby, the Scrivener and then I am also going to talk about his reception and his legacy. Yeah, so we have already done his Moby Dick, and I thought it quite relevant that we should be talking about the man and his other works as well and his everlasting legacy and how reception from age to age, about a work of art or also about the creator. So his early life, so there was, he suffered a bout of scarlet fever in 1826 which left him with permanently weakened eyesight. He attended Albany Classical School in 1835 and in 1839; he shipped out as cabin boy on the merchant ship called St. Lawrence. In 1841, he sailed on the whaler Acushnet, these are all the names of his ships, Acushnet to the South Seas in June 1848, Acushnet, A c u s h n e t. It anchored in French Polynesia.

Now Melville's adventures here in French Polynesia became the subject of his very first novel that is Typee, in 1846. The voyage was unproductive and Melville joined an uprising that landed the mutinous in the Tahitian jail from which he escaped without difficulty. Following this, he wrote through the islands thus proving his bitterness against colonial and

missionary debasement of the natives, so his strong, staunch sympathy for the natives and this is also reflected in his, in his novels and you know Moby Dick and you know how he felt about those people. He was inspired by the plight of the Polynesians and wrote his second book Omoo, in 1847 based on these experiences. His Mardi is again a Polynesian romance published in 1849. Then in 1849, he was very prolific, he wrote another novel in the same year, Redburn which is a potboiler of sorts and is based on his first voyage, to England.

He wrote White Jacket in 1850 which mingles his experiences in the navy and also his sharp protest against its brutality with increasing allegorical implications so we have seen Moby Dick and its allegories and it all began. So he was always interested in allegorical romances. With Moby Dick he reached the epitome of it, of this genre which is so specific to Melville. Later he moved to Massachusetts where he became a friend of Nathaniel Hawthorne, the great writer who wrote The Scarlet Letter and then he, it was during this time, he started his work on Moby Dick. He also wrote The Piazza Tales in 1857 which contains some of his finest short fiction including Benito Cereno, Bartleby, the Scrivener and The Encantadas.

So these are the names or the titles of his stories from The Piazza Tales published in 1857. In 1866, he received the Government appointment. He had been working towards it for a long time and then he began his ten years of service as Custom's official in New York. He wrote a philosophical work called Clarel in 1876. At his death he left the unpublished manuscript of his novella, Billy Budd which was published in 1924. His other important works are, some books of poems, John Marr and Other Sailors and also Timoleon. Timoleon was published in 1891; John Marr was published in 1888.

Talking about his style, you have already seen his style and the characteristic features of Melville in Moby Dick. So just to recap, he writes of adventures at sea, of other countries and cultures which you see so much of in Moby Dick, of homely incidents and extraordinary events all acutely observed and recounted with imagery in poetic language. His stories are presented in rich symbolism, and challenge. Easy explanation, he is not the easiest of all writers to understand.

Allegory is his forte, the perfect vehicle for artistic expression of Melville's preoccupation with the conflict between appearance and reality that underlines so much of human

interaction. Melville's subjects are diverse as you have already seen, particularly *Moby Dick* but his fundamental concern is with human nature and human relationships. For example, in *Bartleby, the Scrivener* he combines pathos and humor to create an unforgettable tale or fable where the stubbornness of an insignificant person can be read as an act of existentialism. And then he writes in his another story, *Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs*, it's, they are companion pieces that reflect on the contradictions of human behavior and ambivalences.

Now we all recognize that today, he is known as of the greatest, or accepted as one of the greatest of American Literature of all times but he was the victim of contemporary misunderstanding, contemporary for his times. Both *Typee* and *Omoo* reflected a sympathy with Pagan tribes that went beyond the romantic concept of the noble savage and was perceived to imply a certain contempt for western attitudes and practices. *Moby Dick* was also not well received because of its many complexities and metaphysical concerns. His work *Pierre* was reviled for its psychological and moral tone, and this was something, it was a thread that ran through all his works.

Now coming to *Billy Budd* today, it is regarded as a masterpiece. Melville sets his story in 1797 and depicts the tension of this period following the mutinies in the English fleet during the war with France. *Billy Budd* is a novella with metaphysical implications where the three central characters, they acquire a symbolic significance. Here Melville creates the tale of treachery, tragedy and betrayal, all these, you know this tale explores human relations and the meaning of, deeper meaning of life and the ultimate meaning of destiny. Talking about his legacy, he created America's greatest prose epic *Moby Dick*, and today he is ranked as one of America's greatest novelist ever. And you have to remember his greatest contribution remains fashioning of the first great romance about the South Seas.

So these are some quick musings on Herman Melville as a writer par excellence. Thank you very much