Spring 2021

"Where Beauty and Anguish Had Contended": Eden, Gender, and Creativity in Melville's *Pierre*

Kersey Reynolds

"Where Beauty and Anguish had contended": Eden, Gender, and Creativity in Melville's *Pierre*

by

Kersey Reynolds

Bachelor of Arts
Centre College, 2019

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts in

English

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2021

Accepted by:

David Greven, Director of Thesis

Paula R. Feldman, Reader

Tracey L. Weldon, Interim Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

DEDICATION

To Scott and Kelly Reynolds, for their love and support; to Charles and Vonah Lee Allen, for my first dictionary and all the words of wisdom since; to Ashley Guice, for modeling creativity and discernment; to Dr. Carmen Tapiador, for the tools to keep whale-chasing; to Trace Oliver, for making the world as large as Melville saw it; and to Pearl, Jack, and Effie, the noblest who ever lived.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. David Greven and Dr. Paula R. Feldman for the advice, patience, and teaching that allowed this task to be a labor of love; Dr. Danielle Coriale for that fateful reading assignment and sharing her own “singular” passion; Dr. Mark Lucas and Dr. Azita Osanloo for pulling my head out of the sand; Dr. Ellen Swanson for her integrity, compassion, and courage; and all those others who have kept things in perspective.

ABSTRACT

Much critical interest regarding incest in *Pierre* has been focused horizontally on the Glendinning family tree, in terms of the brother-sister relationship forged between Pierre Glendinning and Isabel Banford. But this thesis evaluates incest within Melville's scheme of creativity and gender in the novel. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have established, to author a text is to become owner of its subjects—a father of one's "brain-children" (Gilbert and Gubar 7). So, as Pierre writes Isabel into the Glendinning name, the incestuous relationship between Pierre and Isabel may be viewed through the lens of a father-daughter dynamic between the two "siblings." In the creative sense, Pierre's assertion of Isabel's heritage is an act of paternity— an authorial definition of her character in the aristocratic, patriarchal tradition which cloisters Saddle Meadows and its occupants from an increasingly egalitarian America. Consequently, Pierre's authorship of Isabel as a means of indirect self-assertion against the line of Glendinnings leaves his own identity vulnerable outside the realm of Saddle Meadows. Having shied away from the chance to define himself through confrontation with his predecessors, he inadvertently perpetuates the aristocratic tradition he seeks to reject. It is in this sense that he fails to achieve a "fortunate fall" through his self-imposed exile, demonstrating the author's imperative to acknowledge the past within definitions of the future.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The scholarly conversation involving Herman Melville's *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* has been focused largely around the inseparable categories of incest and desire, and socioeconomic tensions of mid-nineteenth century America. The novel's own structure, as Jonathan Crimmins and others have observed, certainly lends itself to such interpretations, bifurcated between the two settings of agrarian Saddle Meadows and New York City. Knotting these two halves together is the thread of Pierre's authorship, as both a writer and as a declarant of self. But the inescapability of the incest dynamic in a novel so heavily preoccupied with the relationship between Pierre's textual self and his own hereditary context has prompted a wide spectrum of analysis: on the one hand, it is regarded as an expression of transcendental self-determination, and on the other as a complete rejection of identity labels imposed by either self or society. In both cases, that dynamic has been approached predominantly from a "horizontal" angle in the Glendinning family tree, concentrated on the implications of brother-sister turned husband-wife.

Overwhelmingly, this analysis tends to land upon the enigma of sameness layered beneath the range of binaries Melville identifies in the novel. That range emerges as a destabilizing force as nineteen-year-old Pierre Glendinning's moral foundation is rocked upon the appearance of Isabel Banford, who arrives in the pastoral village claiming to be the illegitimate daughter of his much-revered, noble father. Concluding in desperation that her story must be true, he decides to "marry" Isabel to preserve his father's image

and protect her with his name. Reassigning sister to wife, Pierre undermines the aristocratic value structure upon which his own identity is premised, and his selfhood is eroded as he seeks a new life in the urban setting, resulting in suicide by the novel's end. All roads lead to the bleak anti-conclusion that Mary E. Dichmann describes succinctly; that the "philosophic basis of [Melville's] novel is the … oneness of [time and human experience]… which leads to the conclusion that good and evil are but obverse sides of the same reality" (Dichmann 703). In this framework, Pierre's incestuous action becomes aligned with the transcendental urge to know the character and source of things, his acknowledgement of Isabel's Glendinning heritage a means of casting light on the true nature of "Glendinning." Given both the psychological and material fallout of that claim, Paul Lewis identifies the "transcendental yearning" which prompts it as a grave error—"the cause and not the cure of desperation" (Lewis 198). It is one thing to recognize ambiguities; it becomes another to defy them. For Pierre, rejecting the ambiguities that stabilize his aristocratic moral code is both outwardly and inwardly destructive; a double-handed release with no safety net in the way of meaninglessness.

While this thesis does not deny that inevitable conclusion in the second half of the novel, its aim is to understand the incest dynamic within the framework of meaning Melville *does* supply. Pierre's fatal reach for knowledge of the Glendinnings is one of the last instances of Edenic parallel in the first half of the book. His curious journey towards an incest narrative takes place in tandem with a wider narrative evocative of Genesis, particularly influenced by Miltonic imagery in Melville's rendering of Saddle Meadows. Like Milton's Eden, Saddle Meadows is strange in its immutability, which serves to perpetuate a vision of idealized nobility. And like Milton's Adam, Pierre does not

become conscious of any dead weight associated with such idealism until the same moment he becomes conscious of *desire* (predating his more specific "transcendental yearning"). As Adam becomes transfixed by Eve, so does Pierre by Isabel, someone from beyond his insulated microcosm, and desire irrevocably alters the relationship of each male character to his own Eden. In this way, the novel's theme of incest is indebted to the Edenic setting of its origin.

Creation is important for Pierre; it is a drive that operates on a dual level. Pierre finds surface-level success as an author while at Saddle Meadows, but finds his creativity stifled within the stoicism of that setting. Just as the Biblical Adam yearns for a companion, Pierre feels strongly the absence of a sister's "fraternal love" (Melville 7). Mysterious Isabel offers him a means to achieve both creative desire and this desire for reunification with the unknown through her claim that they share a father. Situated in the Genesis context, particularly, this link between desire and authorship provides the impetus for a more paternal kind of creativity than Pierre has yet expressed on the page. The incest theme thus takes on a "vertical" father-daughter configuration which departs from the well-mapped brother-sister scheme. Widening our perspective in this way, we can recognize Pierre's assertion of Isabel's Glendinning heritage as an act of Bloomian creativity: a strike in his *agon* against the illusory patriarchal tradition embodied by his aristocratic predecessors. His own self-image shattered by cracks in his that of his father, Pierre "authors" Isabel's identity in an effort to tear down the façade of nobility obscuring the insidious duality he perceives in the institution of Saddle Meadows.

But as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar emphasize, the patriarchal tradition of authorship in which Pierre finds himself embroiled is predicated upon ownership, true to

the feudal structure of aristocracy. Their chapter "The Queen's Looking-Glass" outlines the mechanics of male authority, describing a dynamic in which men write woman characters in terms of absolutes (Gilbert and Gubar 17). Created according to this scheme, female subjects become the possessions of the male author, contained within the boundaries of his definition. This configuration, especially in literature of the Romantic period, might be read as symptomatic of the later-18th century phenomenon Ruth Perry identifies as a "deep interpenetration of economic and sexual motives" (Perry 242) regarding production, writing that "novelists and conduct-book writers alike were deeply concerned with questions of ownership and female sexuality because of the new implications for marriage of the transfer of property" (242). A woman's reproductive capacity became understood in industrial terms—especially for the wealthy upper-class—as a source and vessel of family asset: "sisters and daughters were increasingly seen as [male relatives'] sexual property rather than as co-carriers of the family blood, female avatars of themselves, and by extension female embodiments of their own family honor" (376). Patriarchal authority manifested itself through physical and highly consequential denotations of women as property, to the extent that one legal scholar noted a woman's marriage signified "civil death" as much as spiritual union (DiPlacidi 39).

In the fictional realm, *Pierre* shows this erasure in its extreme as the "marriage" takes place between brother and sister—in Perry's formula, a doubling down on property rather than a move toward expansion. Cindy Weinstein has observed that incest is in fact the default for character relations in the novel. As such, it describes a world of "continual contraction" (Weinstein 177), necessitating overlaps like Pierre's incestuous marriage which prove negatory to its foundation. Of these overlaps, central to this argument is the

conflict between Pierre's purpose in legitimizing Isabel, and his method of doing so. If to author a text is to become the owner of its subjects—a father of one's "brain-children" (Gilbert and Gubar 7)— then Pierre's authorship of Isabel is an act of paternity implicitly contrary to the principles of the democratic world he seeks to enter. And it is in this contradiction that the Edenic framework of the narrative produces perhaps the most important meaning of the novel— the fragility of *felix culpa*, the notion of a fortunate exile from Paradise which imparts the recognition of human fault that enables true redemption. This incestuous mode of authorship only serves to reinforce the norms of the patriarchal tradition governing Saddle Meadows, meaning that Pierre does nothing to establish himself beyond that tradition. Regressing back to this aristocratic method of self-assertion, his "creation" of Isabel Glendinning as proxy for his own independent selfhood results in failure to define himself in opposition to aristocratic principles. Ignoring his own participation in that system, Pierre substitutes this indirect confrontation of his heritage for the necessary Oedipal death-blow to his fathers, rendering his own authority insufficient in itself.

CHAPTER 1

EDEN AND MELVILLE'S AMERICA

Melville's interrogation of prelapsarian existence in *Pierre* has been productively critiqued since the mid- 20th century, laying the ground for further inquiry into the role of gender in this setting. In 1953, Charles Moorman observed that Melville's Edenic allusion in the novel is constructed in such a way that that notion of *felix culpa* demonstrates the "forceless innocence" of a state of being wherein a lack of knowledge of good and evil stymies creativity. In his view, the narrative is structured so that plot becomes quietly distorted—readers are "prepared for the heroic ordeal which should end in heroic triumph" (Moorman 30), only to find our expectations further and further derailed by the perpetual frustrations in Pierre's quest for moral stability. In this way, the *felix culpa* plot ends in limbo, forestalled by the elusiveness of meaning outside the terms of noble tradition— Melville's message is a question mark on the notion of progress.

Seeking (ironically, perhaps) to arrive at a more concrete understanding of Melville's Edenic framework, this thesis benefits from James Kissane's critique of Moorman's argument and its tunnel vision, in Kissane's view. Kissane replies that the layer of Edenic symbolism is important, but is secondary to a plot that very distinctly progresses from delusion to disillusionment to search to dead end (Kissane 569). There is no fortunate recognition of a path towards repossession, nor is one desired. As will be discussed, Pierre rejects the notion of redemption in favor of severance through his declaration of Isabel Glendinning; therefore, Eden is negated in the second half of the

novel. However, Melville's subversive Edenic depiction of Saddle Meadows in rebuking the trend of American exceptionalism is important to understanding the wider implications of Isabel's legitimization via incest.

1.1: LITERARY POLITICS

Tensions surrounding American national identity in the mid-1850s fostered an environment ripe for interrogations of an Edenic ideal. "Manifest Destiny" was first proclaimed soon after Melville returned from four years at sea, traveling to Polynesia, Tahiti, and the Sandwich Islands and witnessing the earliest stages in the colonization of previously undisturbed cultures. Having been insulated from cultural practices beyond the WASP norm in the northeastern United States, this exposure—to his credit—prompted a skepticism of his own native society that ran counter to the enthusiasm amongst his peers, including his brother Gansevoort (Robertson-Lorant 134-35). The idea of any manifest destiny associated with colonial expansion was in Melville's mind a project rank with hypocrisy, particularly for a "Young America" which had seen fit to declare independence from that very same "march to hell" and "moral decay" (135) not a century earlier. Regressing, in Melville's view, towards the colonial model, the Young America movement emphasized a modernized American identity which embraced not only technological development and economic restructuring but also socio-political progress. America needed to wade out of passive isolationism and deeper into the pool of international influence, producing culture rather than receiving it from Europe. However, participation in the *imposition* of culture was an unappealing prospect for Melville after his term at sea. As his biographer Laurie Robertson-Lorant notes, "Melville's sojourn in the Marquesas made him acutely aware of how culture imposes limitations on self-knowledge and self-expression by rigidly defining and determining gender, race, and

class" (111). This awareness would translate to central concerns in the plot of *Pierre*, emphasizing the cost of these impositions on the individual whom American philosophy sought to promote.

At the same time, Melville identified a paradox at the core of the national literary movement. His fellow writers in the Duyckinck circle—including James Fenimore Cooper, who had coined the term "Young America" after "la jeune France"— attempted to maintain distinction between the existing canon and their uniquely American authority through a "Young America in Literature" that similarly embraced disregard for European influence, declaring themselves "partisans of the New against the Old… of the Future against the Past. 'Manifest Destiny' was their 'New Frontier'" (Delblanco 104). Melville himself did not recognize these dichotomies as so easily separable, a problem illustrated through Pierre's complicated extraction from Old World ideology. Michael Davitt Bell suggests that it is a reflection of Melville's own "disillusionment" with the idea of literature as a frame of moral reference that Pierre's life is situated as a text in dialogue with previous writers (Bell 742), highlighting that "if Melville's novel demonstrates the unreliability of literary authorities it also just as clearly demonstrates the impossibility of escaping them" (757). Saddle Meadows is indeed an Arcadian embodiment of the Young America movement's literary model of democratic imperialism, but Melville depicts such an ideal just as untenable in fiction as in real life. *Felix culpa* in this Edenic context would entail recognition and acceptance of the overlapping ambiguities that denote transfer between past and present traditions, but *Pierre* captures the pitfalls in such a process of self-identification. Irony prevails in the novel as incest is the vehicle Melville uses to both emphasize and undermine the problem of sameness at the heart of the Young

American ideal, capitalizing on its capacity to represent "truly transgressive and counter-hegemonic models of desire, sexuality, gender, and society" (DiPlacidi 7). Building upon an inscrutable languor in the introductory setting of *Pierre,* Melville progressively evokes the aristocratic element of America as a source of malaise rooted in stifling similitude. Pierre's ancestral home is a monument to nobility sustained through stasis in the Glendinning bloodline.

Scholars have been quick to recognize that the Eden evoked though Saddle Meadows is a far cry from the one Melville depicts on the "heathen" island of Nuku Hiva in *Typee*. Propped up on aristocratic value systems drained hollow in the context of an industrializing United States, Saddle Meadows itself is decaying from the inside while maintaining a chokehold on its occupants. Just as Isabel proves a potent challenge to the idea of perfect Glendinning nobility, *Pierre* holds a mirror to the American pastoral ideal to reveal the ambiguities of true national independence. Saddle Meadows is an emblem of romantic idealism, where nature and her noble inhabitants seem fully united as "she whisper[s] though her deep groves" into Pierre's "thought-veins;" nature "lifts her spangled crest of a thickly-starred night" and "ten thousand mailed thoughts of heroicness [start] up in Pierre's soul" (Melville 14). But from the very first lines, Melville's narrator teases out disquietude in the background of the pastoral utopia. A strange stillness echoes within the visual splendor of the countryside, leaving the casual observer "wonder-smitten with the trance-like aspect of the green and golden world. Not a flower stirs, the trees forget to wave, the grass itself seems to have ceased to grow, and all Nature, as if suddenly become conscious of her own profound mystery and feeling no refuge for it but silence, sinks into this wonderful and indescribable repose" (1). Such stillness inhibits the

full sensory effect one might expect from a paradise— no fragrances waft from stupefied flowers, no light tessellates through stoic tree branches, no regeneration is hinted at even by the grass. The "repose" elicited here is more aligned with that achieved through a depressant than the invigoration offered by other natural scenes—a deadened sensory experience rather than a heightened one. Robert Miles has identified "tranced grief" as the psychological state induced here: a "negative aspect of memory where idealization, repression, and denial meet as a single destructive nexus" (Miles 168). That destructive threat is manifested in the ambiguities of which Pierre slowly becomes conscious upon Isabel's arrival. For what the stillness of this opening scene represents is the stagnating effect of the aristocratic tradition which still governs Saddle Meadows while democracy rushes ahead outside. Demanding perpetuation of noble homogeneity, this model rejects transfusions of extrinsic vitality, forbidding new life but refusing to give way to death.

1.2: INHERITING FAÇADE

Melville wryly contrasts the aristocratic tradition with the values evolving in a democratic America. Pierre's great-grandfather, General "grand old Pierre" (Melville 29) Glendinning of Revolutionary-era renown, is freely acknowledged in this introductory portion to have established Saddle Meadows in the tyrannical fashion of his aristocratic British ancestors. Nicola Nixon views this historical fiction as a "mute commentary on the supposed triumph of democracy, just as the rent-wars highlighted the presence of aristocratic 'mighty lordships,' and just as the Compromise accentuated the coexistence of liberty and slavery within the Union" (Nixon 725). In fact, this seat of pastoral dominion was the site of a post-revolutionary Native American massacre led by the general, who made "reciprocal bludgeons of [native] heads" (Melville 30) before receiving a mortal wound

himself. This exchange of blood consecrated the site just as much as the "cyphers of three Indian kings, the aboriginal and only conveyancers of these noble woods and plains" (6) on the deed to Saddle Meadows. Chronicling the Glendinning legacy via paper trail, the narrator subtly indicates that this exploitative property deed marks the first chapter of Pierre's own life, inseparable as it is from the larger family narrative. If there is a God in this Genesis story, it is the name "Glendinning," inscribed in blood at Saddle Meadows in an ironic testament to freedom. Creation comes about through death, establishing foundations of paradox.

This irony is the impetus for the "tranced grief" Miles describes, fostered by the contradictions inherent to the notion of Pierre's "noble" heritage in its democratic context. With the natural sphere itself stagnated under the dominion of anti-democratic authority, Saddle Meadows becomes an inevitably static environment, inimical to cycles of growth and decline. At the border of adulthood, Pierre finally begins to feel the inhibiting effects of that sphere working against his own development as heir to the Glendinning name. Miles locates a dual tension in this stagnation, linking Pierre's struggle to inhabit his own identity with his struggle as an author. Irony exists at the level of genre as well, calling into question the validity of both Pierre and *Pierre* as part of a uniquely American tradition: "We often forget that American Gothic is an oxymoron signaling its own uncanniness: in antebellum America, the Gothic was not supposed to be there… For Melville, the Titanesque program of Young America in Literature is merely the mirror image (the double) of the European paternity it wishes to supplant" (Miles 160). Pierre, certainly, is himself no titan of authorship but rather "of a delicate and poetic mind" formed by the "uncommon loveliness" (Melville 5) of the strange Eden at

Saddle Meadows rather than through Bloomian, Titanesque struggle with his predecessors. He takes great pleasure in Spenser, Dante, and Shakespeare as a teen, but his appreciation of their works is limited to surface level: the "Spenserian nymphs had early led him into many a maze of all-bewildering beauty" (6), compounding the effects of Saddle Meadows' stillness. Applying none of his noble "vigor" towards scaling the philosophical walls of that maze "did this Pierre glide toward maturity, thoughtless of that period of remorseless insight, when all these delicate warmths should seem frigid to him, and he should madly demand more ardent fires" (6). Neither does he interrogate the character of his hereditary predecessors beyond (a literal) face value, routinely venerating the portraits of his great-grandfather and his father Pierre Sr.—both "uncorruptibly sainted in heaven" (69)—, which posthumously signify the nobility of the house itself. Aristocratic beauty, on display in aristocratic land, literature, and aspect in these passages, is not simply part of the illusion that Pierre seeks to shatter upon discovering his father's betrayal of noble ideals. Rather, it is an essential feature in perpetuating the ambiguity which protects Saddle Meadows from the encroachment of American social principles—the mere affect of intelligentsia has the same drowsying effect as the façade of the pastoral.

In his essay "The Eden of Saddle Meadows," Samuel Otter highlights that the "exorbitance" of Melville's verbal portrait of Saddle Meadows responds very directly to an antebellum effort "to construct and empower the American difference through representations of the land" (Otter 57). Melville's excessive Romantic grandeur satirizes the notion of that difference existing in a land conquered by people already *themselve*s conquered by European traditions. The near-grotesque exaggeration achieved by the

lengths of Melville's own picturesque descriptions highlights the distorted quality of the British-derived pastoral tradition stretched to fit onto American soil. This distortion mirrors the result of its incestuous enforcement, imparted by the imperial father upon the colonial offspring. If as Miles writes, the Gothic has no place in a principally sound America, neither does this inherited Arcadian construct, wrought by inherited practices of feudal violence. And, if that British ideal is shaky on its own soil, then all the more so for Pierre and his America. For Monica M. Young-Zook, this is certainly the case: British poet laureate Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, published only seven years after *Pierre*, paints Camelot's demise as reflective of national "anxiety" regarding a missing figure of paternal absolutism (Young-Zook 464). The British vision of proto-democratic fraternity embodied by the Knights of the Round Table dramatically fails upon the death of Arthur, revealing the dependency of the feudal system and demonstrating that "the crypt that Arthur and his knights hold for their dead fathers in enacting their lives' unfinished business is ineffective in protecting them against the demands of the new nationhood" (464). In Melville's fictional rendering of Young America, Pierre is exactly such a knight. Petrified in the analogous crypt of Glendinning legend at Saddle Meadows, he is blind to the realities beyond its walls. He reads "fatal Launcelot" (Melville 42) without identifying his own character, instead "glar[ing] round for some insulted good cause to defend" (14) in the Arcadia he fails to register as archaic. Saddle Meadows is an Eden twice removed from its origins of both culture and location, its half-life expired and its notions of romance decayed to delusion.

But as Saddle Meadows constitutes an Eden nonetheless, it is fitting that *Pierre* also falls within the romantic subgenre of the postrevolutionary seduction narrative.

Picking up Otter's emphasis on imagery tied to cultural dialogue, Christopher J. Lukasik locates the novel in this subgenre especially because it "imagined the face as a location from which the absence of distinction would be made visible through physiognomy" (Lukasik 156). For Lukasik, the face operates even beyond the visual level in *Pierre* because it has its own capacity for narrative. His "idolatry" of General Glendinning and Pierre Sr. is exorbitant in the same manner as the narrator's description of Saddle Meadows, oversaturated with romantic idealism. However, the "oddly verbal" impact of their portraits reveals that it is narrative rather than imagery itself that renders Pierre malleable to their authority:

> "Pierre's unselfconscious construction of the mythical Glendinning is the product of his 'sensitive and generous-minded' listening. The portrait speaks to him…He does not see his grandfather's portrait so much as hear its "glorious gospel" and "the heavenly persuasiveness of" its "angelic speech" … Pierre's recollection of his father "as a gentleman and a Christian" is not even his own, but comes from 'the general voice of the world' [68]." (198-99)

Like Eve in the Garden, Pierre is susceptible to whispers in his sphere of lofty idealism. The narrative of aristocracy is very much his lifeblood—his path as an individual obscured, he has only the tradition of Glendinning nobility to follow, ingrained through textual channels as well as genealogy. Yet as critical as this story is to Saddle Meadows, it rings dissonantly in unison within the broader, egalitarian plot of American democracy.

CHAPTER 2

GENDER WITHIN SADDLE MEADOWS

Most significant to this analysis is the way in which incestuous dissonance manifests within the social structure of Saddle Meadows itself, not just at its juncture with the outer social realm. Gendered relationships within the aristocratic family become a source of confusion as it is up to Pierre to continue the Glendinning name, which stands to lose its pedigree upon the introduction of foreign blood into the mix. This dependence on homogeneity prevents Pierre from assuming a distinct identity, but Jenny DiPlacidi posits that the theme of incest itself serves a multidimensional purpose in that it "can equally stand for the extreme imposition of the hypocritical upholders of the law, an active renunciation of these unfair laws, or the rejection of society and its laws" (DiPlacidi 17). Pierre's mother Mary Glendinning is the primary "upholder" of patriarchal law at Saddle Meadows, despite—perhaps also in spite of— his father's infidelity. In this unique function, Mary maneuvers her aristocratic authority to exercise control over Pierre's desires. Isabel's appearance is the first and almost certainly the only opportunity for him to disentangle himself from this dynamic and disrupt Mary's imposition of the existing Glendinning legacy, but not before this dynamic defines him.

2.1: THE MOTHER OF EDEN

Since the death of Pierre Sr., his widow Mary Glendinning has assumed control of the estate, taking on the male role as head of household during her son's adolescence as well. Mary's inhabitation of this authority is of course its own sort of subversion of

aristocratic norms—though a woman, and a Glendinning by marriage, Mary is in charge of not just the household itself but also the property, assets, and the upbringing of the sole male Glendinning heir. In this capacity, she transgresses the boundaries of patriarchal normativity to claim male authority. The stagnancy of Saddle Meadows is embodied in her person, as she is described as a living vessel of aristocratic tradition akin to the portrait of her husband: "Admiration… was her birthright by the eternal privilege of beauty; she had always possessed it… since spontaneously it always encompassed her… she evenly glowed like a vase which…gives no outward sign of the lighting flame, but seems to shine by the very virtue of exquisite marble itself" (15). That Mary and Pierre—whose name is the French derivation of the Greek "petra" (rock, stone)—share this association with stone is telling. Mary benefits from the longevity of this enduring matter in her middle age, but such preservation is a hindrance to Pierre, who is "encased in stone" (Rogin 171) long before he can carve out his own selfhood. Significantly, he identifies as the "American Enceladus," with a "heaven-aspiring, but still not wholly earth-emancipated mood… by its terrestrial taint held down to its terrestrial mother…" (Melville 346-47), identifying with the Titan buried in stone.

Like the estate itself, Mary possesses a magnetic façade, with something of the air of eternal youth about her appearance. In spite of time, "the rose still miraculously clung to her cheek, litheness had not yet completely uncoiled itself from her waist… nor diamondness departed from her eyes" (4). Her image is perpetuated in tandem with the continuance of her noble lineage, both seemingly carved into the same stone. In this sense, Mary's reflection of the stagnant atmosphere she governs is a weapon in her arsenal of control, demonstrating the reach of her influence beyond the immediate family

setting. Even amongst young men of Pierre's own age, her allure ensures she remains "followed by a train of infatuated suitors" (5) at her whim. Mary's distinctly aristocratic beauty is consciously a means of persuasion and dominance at her command in the setting at large. But this influence also delineates a strong dislocation of desire within the nuclear family at Saddle Meadows. For not only are Pierre's friends subject to a kind of inadvertent desire for Mary, but he himself experiences a desire for her which exceeds typical maternal attachment.

In her seat of aristocratic authority, Mary Glendinning inhabits a collage of variations on the archetypal negative mother, exacerbating Pierre's crisis of identity with her overbearing influence. In Chapter 5 ("Herman Melville's *Eighteenth Brumaire*") of his book *Subversive Genealogy*, Michael Paul Rogin illustrates the oppositional relationship that exists directly between Mary and Isabel: the devouring mother in competition with the Gorgon over male desire. His analysis is deeply informative here, and will lend important distinctions in the application of a more directly feminist reading of the text. Rogin identifies Mary with a Semiramis figure, foreshadowing the destructive reaction of the son against the self-centered demands of the mother (Rogin 173). In this role, Mary enforces the stoicism of the aristocracy on a psychological level just as much as the material one— the value of class homogeneity becomes further concentrated in the family setting, discouraging Pierre's self-distinction in large part so as not to threaten maternal authority. While *Pierre* as a whole does not indicate a misogynistic attitude on Melville's part, this depiction of Mary in particular does suggest a deep-seated mistrust of the constraints enforced by gender roles in the domestic sphere. Isabel, of course, is just far enough removed from a shared domestic and aristocratic bubble to represent a

location where Pierre may define himself. Additionally, her claim to kinship would correct the most notable absence in the "illuminated scroll" of his life, as Pierre already "[mourns that] a sister had been omitted from the text" (Melville 7). Thus already present in her absence, Isabel is his "negative identity" (Rogin 168), in whom he may find validation and power in his own desires rather than confusion and repression. She is the shadow of his own alternate self that might exist beyond the confines (physical and psychological) of the estate—the part that remains unknown to Mary for consumption. Rogin reads Isabel as Mary's rival in that she "is freedom from family constriction," but reinforces his selfhood by "fulfill[ing] the promise of love offered and unconsummated in the family" (168). This self-defeating contradiction in Isabel's symbolic meaning for Pierre is demonstrative of the novel's disillusionment with domestic relationships between men and women.

But even before Isabel appears in the flesh, Mary's influence has resulted in visible confusion of Pierre's desire, overlapping the roles of the nuclear family. Pierre is left "namelessly annoyed, and sometimes even jealously transported" to notions of violence (5) at the thought that a competitor for his mother's affection may arise amongst his own peers. This irritation certainly serves Mary's narcissistic desires, as her son's extreme devotion is "invested with all the proudest delights and witcheries of self-complacency" and a source of "heavenly evanescence… miraculously revived in the courteous lover-like adoration of Pierre" (16). That mother and son are in the habit of referring to each other as brother and sister reinforces Weinstein's claim that Pierre's filial love masks an innate tendency toward incest in this setting, especially given Pierre's singular longing for a true sister.

This connotation further permeates the match intended between Pierre and Lucy Tartan, a neighboring young lady of similar aristocratic pedigree. That particular similarity is of the utmost importance to Mary, who blends the shade of incest into this betrothal through subtle but clear metaphor. Pierre protests,

> 'Romeo! oh, no. I am far from being Romeo… he came to a very deplorable end, did Romeo, sister Mary.'
>
> 'It was his own fault though…He was disobedient to his parents… He married against their particular wishes…. But you, Pierre, are going to be married… not to Capulet, but to one of our own Montagues; and so Romeo's miserable fortune will hardly be yours. You will be happy.'
>
> 'The more miserable Romeo!'
>
> 'Don't be so ridiculous, brother Pierre… [Lucy] is a sweet girl, a most lovely girl.'
>
> '…she is—yes—though I say it—Dates!—he's a precious long time getting that milk!' (18-19)

This passage illustrates in full Jennifer Toner's claim that Pierre's heritage is "explicit[ly] linked" (Toner 252) with text, in such depth that it is hardly recognizable to him until arguably too late. Indeed, Pierre does come to share in a twisted inversion of Romeo's fate, but the tragedy is the fact that *his* script is already laid before him. The link to Shakespeare is more than coincidental; it is demonstrative of the manner in which authorship and aristocracy are linked by patriarchy. Allusion to Shakespearean tradition achieves a dual purpose here: first, to identify Pierre's authority as descendant of Shakespeare's; and second, to insist upon his ill-fated match with "our own" Lucy as a

condition of that authority. Pierre might rebel with an "ignorant burst of his young impatience" (Melville 54) against such giants as Dante, but in both his youth and his descendancy he remains "entirely incompetent to meet the grim bard fairly" (54). The paper trail of Glendinning heritage begun at the battle of Saddle Meadows remains a small tributary to the ocean of European literary tradition bound to patriarchal aristocracy. Allegiance to the noble class of "Montagues" is the surest way for Mary to protect both Pierre and the legacy he represents, and Lucy Tartan is its perfect vessel. But both Mary's metaphor and Pierre's thinly veiled hesitancy about this engagement nod to the sense of perversity which shadows the golden pair.

2.2: INCEST AS INEVITABLE

Lucy Tartan's abundant reflection of upper-class homogeneity reinforces Mary's insulation of Pierre within the realm of Saddle Meadows. Not only are nuclear family relationships imbued with incest, but so are the necessary barely-exogamous ones. Lucy is an image of the aristocratic ideal specific to this setting—not only does she share Pierre's British family origin, but her very last name is symbolic of a tightly interwoven family bond. Upon encounter, Lucy and Pierre find in each other "mutual reflections" (4) of gallant aspect, seemingly natural complements of one another in their Arcadian cocoon. Lucy's aristocratic beauty is also the perfect complement to Mary's desire for perpetual veneration from her son, self-contained in a submissive regard. Mary reflects,

> 'A fine, proud, loving, docile, vigorous boy. Pray God, he never becomes otherwise to me. His little wife, that is to be, will not estrange him from me, for she too is docile,-- beautiful and reverential, and most docile. Seldom yet have I known such blue eyes as hers, that were not docile and

would not follow a bold black one, as two meek blue-ribboned ewes, follow their martial leader.' (20)

Lucy's features described here correspond with the picture of virtuous, Protestant—and glaringly white— femininity suited to represent the image of a noble family; femininity desexed and "industrialized" (Perry 242) for family gain. Nothing in her "meek" aspect poses any sort of threat to Mary's "glittering" (Melville 90) dominance in the way that Isabel's might, but as easily as her appearance helps to foster her admission into the line of Glendinnings, it is also evidence of the ill-conception of such an introduction.

The overladen innuendo between Mary and Pierre alone reinforces Gillian Silverman's observation that "Melville imagined [the] family itself as *already* incestuously configured" (Silverman 91, italics mine), in that miscegenation anxieties in Victorian society had produced an obsession with class, racial, and cultural homogeneity. It is in this sense that regardless of Isabel, Pierre is predestined to perpetuate the aristocracy by marrying his sibling— one of his own "relations" who shares in those socioeconomic markers that come to serve as a sort of pedigree themselves. "After all," Silverman argues, "it is Lucy, his betrothed, who most resembles Pierre in appearance, and it is she whom he first calls 'sister' [29]" (91). The perpetuation of the aristocratic class must be achieved from within, as it immediately becomes invalidated through the integration of "foreign" bodies. Yet this construction has inevitably weakened each successive generation of Glendinnings: social and genetic walls narrow closer and closer, eventually producing the kind of deformed identity confronted by Pierre. Just as Saddle Meadows is confoundingly conquered in the name of freedom, the aristocratic Glendinnings maintain purity through overlapping of gendered family roles.

It is in this context that Pierre finds himself at a critical location in the family line: the last male Glendinning, his identity is poised to be submerged in his heritage, preserving that idea of purity through submission to ambiguity. Consequently, any text of his own authorship is preconceived as the limp offspring of a weak poet who, in Bloom's terms, fails to "[transform] the blindness of their precursors into the revisionary insights of their own work" (Bloom 10). Again, Melville points us towards the threatening instability of this notion through Mary, as she herself muses,

> 'Yet but just now I fondled the conceit that Pierre was so sweetly docile! Here sure is a most strange inconsistency! For is sweet docility a general's badge… Here's something widely wrong. Now I almost wish him otherwise than sweet and docile to me, seeing that it must be hard for man to be… a commander among his race, and yet never ruffle any domestic brow… So shall he remain all docility to me, and yet prove a haughty hero to the world!' (Melville 20)

Central to Pierre's experience, though, is what Paul Lewis has called an "addiction to the absolute" (Lewis 188), rendering such bifurcation of his character an extreme psychological peril. Nevertheless, this is the demand placed upon him by the incestuous Arcadian scheme which preserves Saddle Meadows. Life-giving ambiguity must be preserved even as it stifles creative production, inhibiting both text and identity—there is no room for Bloomian evolution in the Glendinning narrative.

CHAPTER 3

ISABEL AND CREATIVE SELFHOOD

It is evident through this analysis that incest and Eden are intertwined in *Pierre*, woven together long before Pierre himself is a part of the setting. Incest is inevitable, mandated to protect and maintain the value of aristocracy; however, Isabel Banford presents an opportunity for Pierre to break that devolving cycle of patriarchal bloodlines. She represents opposition to ultra-homogenous nobility—working-class, mixed nationality, and most importantly a living rebuttal of a noble ethic, she is the antithesis of aristocratic tradition, yet claims to be born of it. Acknowledging their shared father means proving that the value of the noble ethic has already run dry. Her significance to the theme of incest is therefore far greater than her ability to embody the thematic conclusion of binary oppositions as two sides of the same coin. Rather, that embodiment leaves Isabel singularly positioned to read as a symbol of binary *collapse*—the process which would liberate Pierre's selfhood from interment within the tradition of Saddle Meadows. However, Isabel's complicated self-assertion proves an unsteady foundation for such a movement.

3.1 GETTING BACK TO NATURE

As much as Lucy Tartan reinforces Mary Glendinning's aristocratic governance, Isabel defies and rejects it. As Rogin writes, Isabel "promises to reintegrate the self at the price of destroying the family," proving at once Pierre's "fantasy" (Rogin 163) and Mary's antithesis. In these terms, her presence alone strains the bond between mother and

son; her own influence indirectly aims to disintegrate it. It is for this reason that DiPlacidi defines brother-sister incest as the most threatening to patriarchal structures in that a brother "[functions] more commonly as an equal sufferer under patriarchal power" along with the sister, and their dynamic together "excludes any paternal or head of family position" (DiPlacidi 85-86). Ironically, Isabel's appearance is in fact the catalyst for Pierre's awareness and anxiety regarding the incestuous subtext of his "romantic filial love" (Melville 5). However, his particular anxiety reflects Melville's own attitudes rather than those aligned with the predominant Victorian-era discourse around incest, which Mary Jean Corbett has identified as a thinly veiled upper-class expression of xenophobia (Corbett 6). Melville's encounter with the primitive and "uncivilized" during his early adult voyages had cast substantial doubt on the notion of moral benefit derived from isolation within any identity categories enforced by Victorian ethics. In much the same way, Pierre begins to identify sameness with threat—the familiar as illusion— after encountering Isabel, especially upon her cryptic suggestion of "*thy sister*" (64) in her letter to him. This possibility etches the thinnest crack of doubt in Pierre's image of his much-revered father, persisting until its viability threatens to crumble the moral pedestal on which his entire family sits. Like Melville himself upon return from Polynesia, Pierre begins to experience discomfort rather than identification with the values ingrained in the domestic hearth.

This comparison's implicit parallel between Isabel and the heathen agrees with Rogin's identification of her as the "savage child… the return of the dispossessed child of nature" (Rogin 167). Isabel's image becomes a source of refuge from the sameness of the aristocratic sphere the very same moment it highlights that sameness by contrast. In her

otherness, she conjures the native pagan upon whose subjugation Glendinning authority was first established—the natural inhabitants of this unnatural Eden. Yet, she is also alter-European: at least half French, with features that polarize her in opposition to the nominal Glendinnings. Upon first glance, she radiates passion counter to noble sensibilities—she is visibly torn with "the intensest struggle in her bosom," while "her dark olive cheek is without a blush, or any sign of disquietude" (Melville 46). Such an impression does her contrast form in Pierre's mind that she becomes simply "the face" (48) stamped upon his consciousness, altering his perception of the familiar around him. Its stoic beauty, though olive rather than marble, rivals the impassivity in Mary's. Isabel's is the "face of supernaturalness" (46) come to reckon with the constructed physiognomy of aristocracy. In Lukasik's terms, "the face confirms, rather than refutes, the claims of the seducer" (Lukasik 207). Her resemblance to Pierre's father enables her insurgency in Glendinning tradition, seeming to verify her membership only to nullify the tradition entirely.

It is indeed a near-supernatural effect that Isabel's face takes upon Pierre. For the first time, he experiences the overwhelming urge of independent desire: "A wild, bewildering, and incomprehensible curiosity had seized him, to know something definite of that face… he entirely surrendered himself, unable as he was to combat it" (47). Here, finally, is the point at which Eden suddenly approaches a precipice. Pierre's need to engage Isabel excludes possibility for the doubleness that sustains Saddle Meadows to continue. His absolutism demands that the myth of Glendinning nobility withstand challenge to its character, but the combined force of his creative and sisterly desires demands that Isabel be fully revealed. "The face" is the irresistible forbidden fruit, a

malignant mutation in the ecosphere of Saddle Meadows that threatens its demise. If indeed distinction and its lack may both be represented in a face, then Isabel's epitomizes both in her damning resemblance of Pierre's father, demanding that duplicity itself be acknowledged.

3.2: AUTHORSHIP

Essential to the overall plot of Pierre's assertion as Isabel proves, it is critical to remember that it is always within *his* power to determine her veracity. In terms of Gilbert and Gubar's argument, narrative power is male power. Authorship is a channel of broader patriarchal authority, the means through which men dictate the nature of their subject matter. It is distinctive of their feminist reading of this dynamic that the author's "pen's power, like his penis's power, is not just the ability to generate life but the power to create a posterity to which he lays claim" (Gilbert and Gubar 6). This alignment of pen and sexual organ makes it impossible for a woman author to determine posterity in her own right. As Weinstein notes, reality in *Pierre* is conditional— "the speech act has made it so" (Weinstein 180-81), and while Mary *perpetuates* a narrative, no woman authors one. And so, in the patriarchal scheme, the textuality of Pierre's life is *doubly* established through his male membership in aristocracy—documented in writing since the founding of Saddle Meadows—, while Isabel's life remains an authorless text in the absence of any paternal mandate.

But neither yet does Pierre himself inhabit the full power of male authorship. Gilbert and Gubar nod towards Bloom's characterization of authorship as a "battle between strong equals, father and son as mighty opposites" (Bloom 11), in which framework Pierre is unquestionably disadvantaged. The incestuous configuration of his

lineage, with its imperative of sameness driving reproduction, has located him in a devolved rather than accrued selfhood. Dryden remarks that as the namesake of both father and great-grandfather, Pierre is "doubly derived, the copy of a copy and as such a diminution, a smaller, weaker version of the authoritative original" (Dryden 152), rendering him incapable of doing authoritative battle on the equal terms Bloom assumes. Choosing to accept Isabel's claim of a shared father drags his predecessors down from the higher ground of moral illusion, helping to level the field.

Rogin interprets this decision as indicative of Pierre's Oedipal desire to kill the image of both "his father's virtue and his mother's disinterested love" (Rogin 169), emphasizing that it is not predicated upon sexual desire for Isabel because that is the model set forth by the "romantic father" who he wishes to destroy, not embody (171). But placing the feminist lens over this framework highlights the duality of Pierre's motives; there is, as always, a conflation of desires in one location. In effect, the choice to "marry" Isabel means that Pierre takes both genealogical *and* textual ownership of her by placing his signature on her narrative of origin. This allows Pierre to annex her identity as his own double, strengthening him in that *agon* with the father, and ultimately satisfies a *procreative* desire. Placing his signature on her tale, he authors Isabel Glendinning, appropriating her as his own textual offspring. And it is in this manner that Pierre seeks to achieve his own *felix culpa*, with Isabel as his weapon in the battle for liberation.

3.3: TEMPTATION

Upon leaving Saddle Meadows for good, Pierre believes firmly that he has resolved the conflict that Melville identified facing Young America. He has torn the façade of nobility from the inherited traditions of his forebearers, touting Isabel as proof

of the duplicities behind principles of hierarchy and manifest claims to cultural dominance. But he does not recognize that "the face" is the low-hanging fruit in his quest for independent assertion; yet another outer determinant upon which his identity becomes predicated. Pierre thinks himself freed from the context of duplicity, but Sacvan Bercovitch describes the way in which he has merely added another layer to cover it: "The historic discrepancy implicitly portrayed in Pierre's grandfather, between the gentleman and the murderer, relates to the American present through the two portraits of Pierre's father" (Bercovitch 221). One is the "official portrait of the late master of Saddle Meadows, the public face of rural America;" the other, "the 'Chair Portrait,' denies the geniality and harmony of Saddle Meadows… [and] manifests itself as the face of Isabel, who links the inhumanities of the past with those of the present" (221). This thesis is not concerned with a moral evaluation of Isabel's character, but emphasizes that as her image aligns her with forbidden fruit, so does her presentation of her mysterious story align her with an agent of temptation. She is a covert personification of the mobile threat of ambiguity, offering Pierre a way out of aristocratic tradition which in fact sustains his participation within it.

Like his depiction of Mary Glendinning, Melville's portrayal of Isabel in this light reflects a suspicion of Victorian culture norms; here specifically the female dichotomy of angels and monsters (Gilbert and Gubar 17). Mary and Isabel are no angels of the domestic sphere, but neither does Lucy Tartan's angelic persona provide Pierre enough satisfaction or comfort to merit her adherence to the role ("*I* to wed this heavenly fleece?... It can not be; I am of heavy earth, and she of airy light" [Melville 58]). María Felisa López Liquete reads this dynamic as critical of the "false idealization of women"

itself rather than of the women subjected to it, noting Robert S. Kellner's observation that Melville's iterations of these tropes tend to reflect women as either "unwitting sirens" or "shrews" (Liquete 116). Witting or unwitting, Isabel certainly falls within the former category, but it is Pierre's fault in allowing her metaphorical song to dictate his future: "Melville is clear about what he does reject: upholding woman as a moral guardian. That mistaken standard is repressive; woman as potential paragon spells annihilation; women themselves feel obligated to suffocate self-expression" (122). But Isabel's siren song is strategic in that suffocation; it breathes just enough to entice Pierre into finishing the melody himself.

While Pierre is dominated by Bloomian anxiety of influence, Isabel clearly does not suffer from a woman's "anxiety of authorship"– for *if* she wants to take her father-creator's place, she does not face the uphill challenge of revising Pierre's "reading" of her to that end (Gilbert and Gubar 49). Gilbert and Gubar remark that the literary woman is twice over a "[Cypher]" who "exist[s] merely and punningly to increase male 'Numbers' [either poems or persons], by pleasuring either men's bodies or their minds, their penises or their pens" (9). Such is Isabel within the novel's scheme of textual heredity, yet within this role she subverts Pierre's male authority. If "in the female Gothic plot, the transgressive male becomes the primary threat to the female protagonist" (Punter and Byron 81), Isabel—in her own textual selfhood—*relies* on that transgression to engender the narrative she desires. She fashions her very ambiguity as an allure, inviting Pierre to make his own mark on the blank canvas of her identity.

Fittingly, her first step is taken in writing, through the letter she addresses to Pierre inviting him to hear her tale at the farmhouse outside the village. Melville douses

Pierre's reception of the letter in the language of temptation, going so far as to place competing angels on his shoulders. The "bad" angel bids him destroy the letter and remain ignorant of its paradigm-altering contents, while "The good angel seemed mildly to say—Read, Pierre, though by reading thou may'st entangle thyself, yet mays't thou thereby disentangle others. Read, and feel that best blessedness which, with the sense of all duties discharged, holds happiness indifferent" (Melville 63). Like in Genesis, "blessedness" is the aim of pursuing transgressive knowledge. The good angel here is in fact in league with "the face;" another symbol of unity between opposites hiding in plain sight. Lewis describes Isabel's letter as a "dagger… [which] leaves him bleeding internally from a wound that never quite heals" (190). If indeed a blade, it is doomed to botch Pierre's attempt at disentanglement, turning inevitably towards him at the end of the stroke meant for Glendinning falsehood.

Traveling from Saddle Meadows to Isabel's remote farmhouse is a symbolic journey from one literary understanding of nature to another, mirroring Pierre's reorientation towards the nature of principles governing Saddle Meadows. In this way, Isabel prompts a change in genre for Pierre's hereditary narrative. Bell writes that in rejecting a Wordsworthian ethic of nature at Saddle Meadows (parallel to Melville's own rejection of Young American grandeur), Pierre encounters a Gothic version of nature in the surrounding forest—the "dark, defiant romanticism of Byron" (Bell 754). These Gothic surroundings (which recall European tradition) constitute Isabel's own counter-sphere, which exists in opposition to the patriarchal realm of Saddle Meadows but contains the same threat to individuality (Crimmins 455). Like Isabel herself, the location

is a reminder of the primitive, "uncivilized" nature subjugated at the founding of Saddle Meadows, returned now to fester in its diminished state.

This Gothic setting lifts the suppression of the unconscious, mediating the exchange between Pierre and Isabel through an abstract sensuality which substantiates the unknown. This abstraction is perhaps best understood through acoustic and linguistic analysis of the farmhouse meeting outlined by Michael Jonik and Paul Hurh, who read these features of the text as evocative of the incest dynamic between Pierre and Isabel. From their first exchange, Isabel clearly defers her narrativity to Pierre's authority, insisting, "'I have no tongue to speak to thee, Pierre, my brother. My whole being, all my life's thoughts and longings are in endless arrears to thee; then how can I speak to thee?'" (Melville 113). Her own person is made completely suggestible to Pierre, to an extent which borders on ludicrous as she begs "'Conjure tears for me,'" and weeps only after Pierre issues forth a command to nature itself: "'Ye thirst-slaking evening skies, ye hilly dews and mists, distil your moisture here! The bolt hath passed, why comes not the following shower? –Make her to weep!'" (113). In such hyperbolic fashion is ratification of his own narrative speech demonstrated, providing him a sample of the authority denied him within Saddle Meadows.

However, Isabel sways Pierre towards endorsing her tale through far subtler means. Her story is inherently vague, intangible between layers of memory, confusion, suggestion, and gaps:

> "'the wide and vacant blurrings of my early life thicken in my mind. All goes wholly memoryless to me now… I grew sick with some fever, in which for a long interval I lost myself. Or it may be true, which I have

> heard, that after the period of our very earliest recollections, then a space intervenes of entire unknowingness… Scarce know I at any time whether I tell you real things, or the unrealest dreams. Always in me, the solidest things melt into dreams, and dreams into solidities." (117)

The disorientation of Isabel's narrative is reflected in her language, marked by constant qualifications and diverting cadences, which arrive at possibilities always followed by another turn. Weinstein notes that this untethered quality is itself part of Isabel's allure for Pierre: "[it] is the condition… to which Pierre aspires, because with it comes the inability to know the difference between virtue and vice, exogamy and endogamy" (Weinstein 182). At times she interrupts herself, overcome in her own confusion ("'I say I know, but still I am uncertain, still Pierre, still the—oh the dreaminess, the bewilderingness—it never entirely leaves me. Let me be still again'" [Melville 121]), her only recourse to let the impressions seep out as she plays her guitar in these intervals. Her speech and her music unite to cry out for interpretation— as Jonik explains,

> "repeated alliterations… extended modulating assonances, on-flowing gerunds and participles create a reverb and tremolo. Words literarily echo off one another… or become anastrophic mirrorings… The guitar both registers and translates Isabel's affective ambiguities and her unstable sense of 'humanness.'" (Jonik 33)

This instability is solved by Pierre's confirmation; she requires him to validate the truth of her being in order to maintain unity of self, which synonymously becomes union with Pierre upon merging of their paternal narratives. Hurh adds that Melville's repurposing of adjectives into abstract nouns—such as "'the infinite mercifulness, and tenderness, and

beautifulness of humanness… the whirlingness of the bewilderingness'" (Melville 122)— reinforces the presence of the ambiguous: "By treating qualities as things, Melville's pseudo-gothic language reaches for the sound of a world in which qualities do not inhere in substance, but are themselves substance, painted on from the outside" (Hurh 253-54). This dynamic recalls Weinstein's observation that the notion of truth is extremely fragile in Pierre, dependent upon the overwhelmingly unreliable narrators of patriarchal tradition. Qualities are not inherent to a subject; they are transferable commodities. Reality's subjection to language in the novel mirrors the centrality of names and titles for the nobility (for whom language uniquely becomes an asset), whose own prerogative it is to assign such qualities. It is Pierre, the authoritative outsider, who must paint a label upon Isabel that establishes her as whole and complete. And with meaning "foreclose[d]" even by the "palindromic and tautological structure" (254) of Isabel's self-presentation, she has voluntarily precluded herself from determination, reserving that capacity for Pierre.

It is in this way that Isabel's approach of Pierre with her own mangled life scroll can be read as an act of seduction. It is not sexual desire she offers to fulfill, but rather creative desire fueled by his anxiety of influence. Her face *and* her tale combine to offer a narrative trajectory alternative to the Glendinning legacy (Lukasik 202). As the subversive cipher, Isabel has no need to declare "I am" because she has the power to hijack Pierre's pen in his own hand. She offers what Pierre is incapable of refusing—the possibility of retroactively prompting his father's own self-destruction. Whereas Rogin makes the distinction between Pierre's "appropria[tion]" and "recogni[tion]" of Isabel, arguing that recognition is not an option because it would "acknowledge his own

[Oedipal] vengeance and desire" (Rogin 168), this reading allows for both responses constituted in a single act. Recognition of Isabel's alleged heritage *is* an act of vengeance by default, a revealing blow to the false morality Pierre seeks to invalidate; appropriation is the natural effect of his reunification with the negative identity. Upon owning Isabel as his sister, he can write her as "Glendinning" himself through "marriage" in order to correct the sins of the father. He can then take his father's place as author while escaping responsibility for the symbolic destruction he wreaks by asserting not "I am," but rather "*she* is, therefore I *am not*." The fruitful knowledge Isabel offers Pierre through her tale is not only forbidden in its implications against Glendinning nobility, but also low-hanging—an irresistible loophole for the perfect Oedipal crime.

CHAPTER 4

EXILE

4.1: PARADISE FORGOTTEN

Pierre is not mistaken in his rejection of decayed aristocratic principles, but rather in the indirectness of that rejection. Seeking to dislocate *himself* from Glendinning tradition though his location of Isabel within that sphere, Pierre shies away from direct confrontation with his forebears. In Bloom's terms, he is the consummate weak poet, doomed to "the self-baffled enterprise not of Prometheus but of blinded Oedipus, who did not know that the Sphinx was his Muse" (Bloom 10). Though Isabel is the foil to the aristocratic beauty and textuality of both Mary and Lucy Tartan, it is really Pierre that she undermines in his attempt to tear down the walls of Eden. Consequently, he sabotages the ambiguity that perpetuates the Old World realm of Saddle Meadows without defining *himself* against it in a manner that could reinforce his own identity in the democratic realm he endeavors to enter.

The depth of Pierre's attachment—conscious and unconscious—to the structures of his aristocratic heritage leaves him vulnerable to the temptation of Isabel's narrative. As Priscilla Wald notes, Isabel cannot act as a catalyst for Pierre's "break with the past, with the arbitrary symbolism of Saddle Meadows, because he refamiliarizes her and draws her into the prewritten manuscript of identity… Pierre does not want to alter the text, but merely to modify it, and he is unprepared to rewrite" (Wald 103). However, her effect is to necessitate his departure into the urban, democratic world of Young America,

where Melville contrasts the dissonance of Saddle Meadows with an equally unforgiving portrait of "capitalism's inherent dependence on contingency" (Crimmins 441). It is at once essential and impossible for Pierre to alter his autobiographical text in this setting which is in denial of influence, and it is too late by the time he has already claimed Isabel's identity as the foundation of his own.

This inadvertent perpetuation of ownership illustrates a dynamic in which "the condition of inalienability that structures the patrimonial estates presents the initially attractive possibility of removal from the turbulent world of property relations, exchange, and commodification, but it turns out to be an ideological fantasy supported primarily by violence and death" (Clymer 173). As Pierre comes to realize that the cost of democratic liberation is simply a new kind of textual commodification, he becomes detached from his writing, fixed on the idea of "anonymousness in authorship" (Melville 249)—an idea preconceived using Isabel's idiosyncratic speech pattern. It is at this point that demarcations of the border encircling Pierre's identity begin to dissolve, his incestuous union with Isabel swiftly eroding his individuality to illustrate a "Melvillean self" (Hardack 254) drowned in the colossal otherness it seeks. Bercovitch adds, "[Pierre's] work becomes a self-portrait whose 'vacant and void depths' [p. 351] proclaim the impossibility of creating 'true literature' within the framework of 'Young America.' Symbolically, this portrait reflects the national literary ideal belied, like the portraits of the 'paternal gods' of Saddle Meadows, but the real social conditions of America" (Bercovitch 225). Pierre misses the big picture by falling into a black hole— his alliance with Isabel has won him the battle of Saddle Meadows, not the Bloomian war. He fails to see that the enemy is not ambiguity, but instead the delusion of the absolute.

Appropriating Isabel has led him to reject misreading as a means of authorship, burying the "wisdom of the strong poets" (Bloom 9) and dissecting himself into copy after copy.

Moorman's vision of a fortunate fall indeed does not come to pass in the second half of the novel, but not because Melville's Edenic allusion is intended merely to frustrate meaning. Rather, it is because Pierre remains tragically oblivious to the incongruity of taking patriarchal, textual *ownership* of Isabel in order to divorce himself from feudal practice. Though the "uniquely erotic and egalitarian nature of the brother-sister bond" (DiPlacidi 87) aligns with democratic principles, Pierre's decision to "own" Isabel via marriage falls back in the pattern of aristocratic stagnation. *Felix culpa* is achieved through a recognition of human fault that brings about redemption; Pierre recognizes Isabel as the signifier of that fault but fails to locate it in his own self. Avoiding direct participation in confrontation with his predecessors, he rejects their portraits only to lose the chance to gaze in a mirror and distinguish himself as evolved instead of unrelated.

4.2: IMPLICATIONS OF A FEMINIST INTERJECTION

This paper has sought to expand the possibilities of how we might re-encounter *Pierre* by stepping back from the circular frustrations presented in its second act, and asking not just how but *when* that vortex of meaning becomes so inevitable. Kissane is ultimately correct in his misgivings towards understanding the entire novel as a retelling of Eden—the latter half effectually poses the uncomfortable question, "What if there is no Eden at all?" But if Pierre the character is ultimately hopeless, the same is not necessarily true for Melville's novel. There is a fortunate outcome to be gained through

this unfortunate exile, but only, Melville demonstrates, if the knowledge which prompts it is reconciled with the self.

With this understanding, analysis of Isabel's function as Pierre's textual offspring sheds light on Melville's perspective of women's roles in defining identity. Examining the theme of incest with respect to the context of its Edenic origin serves to ground the novel in its own historical moment and illustrates the correspondence between Pierre's compromised selfhood and the project of Young America in Literature. It is true on both these levels that "the story bears witness to the mortifying vitality of memories that have been buried alive" (Miles 168), but it is vital to excavate Isabel herself as the site of that burial in that it is also true "Isabel could be anyone" (168). As a woman figure, she is emblematic of the patriarchal power of definition, absent of her own authority and therefore a repository for male assertions of character and quality. Yet perhaps this absence of the woman herself as author is meant to register Melville's recognition of its cost. If the woman writer has the unique perspective capable of identifying and rejecting inherited patriarchal constructs of identity, then she is in fact essential to the process of a legitimate *redefinition* of identity. Without her, it is impossible to recognize a flawed Eden to begin with, or to conceive a new vision which consciously rectifies previous flaws. Without her, our best chance is forgery of an identity sans heredity, vulnerable to an unmediated past. Through Pierre's tragic example, Melville demonstrates that the woman's voice contains vast potential for self-reflection—we have only to resist temptation to use a mirror as a shield.

WORKS CITED

Bell, Michael Davitt. "The Glendinning Heritage: Melville's Literary Borrowings in 'Pierre.'" *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 12, no. 4, 1973, pp. 741–762. *JSTOR*.

Bercovitch, Sacvan. "Melville's Search for National Identity: Son and Father in 'Redburn,' 'Pierre,' and 'Billy Budd.'" *CLA Journal*, vol. 10, no. 3, 1967, pp. 217–228. *JSTOR*.

Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. 2nd edition, Oxford University Press, 1997.

Clymer, Jeffory A. "Property and Selfhood in Herman Melville's *Pierre*." *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 61, no. 2, 2006, pp. 171–199.

Corbett, Mary Jean. *Family Likeness: Sex, Marriage, and Incest from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf*. Cornell University Press, 2010.

Crimmins, Jonathan. "Nested Inversions: Genre and the Bipartite Form of Herman Melville's *Pierre*." *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 64, no. 4, 2010, pp. 437–464.

Delblanco, Andrew. *Melville: His World and Work*. Penguin Random House, 2006.

Dichmann, Mary E. "Absolutism in Melville's Pierre." *PMLA*, vol. 67, no. 5, 1952, pp. 702–715.

DiPlacidi, Jenny. *Gothic incest: Gender, sexuality, and transgression*. Manchester University Press, 2018. *JSTOR*.

Dryden, Edgar A. "The Entangled Text: Melville's Pierre and the Problem of Reading." *Boundary 2*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1979, pp. 145–174.

Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. 2nd ed., Yale Note Bene Press, 2000.

Hardack, Richard. "'Thou Shalt Not Be Cozened': Incest, Self-Reliance, and the Portioning of Gendered Bodies in the Works of Herman Melville." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2013, pp. 253–306.

Hurh, Paul. “The Sound of Incest: Sympathetic Resonance in Melville's ‘Pierre.’” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2011, pp. 249–267. *JSTOR*.

Jonik, Michael. “Murmurs, Stutters, Foreign Intonations: Melville's Unreadables.” *Oxford Literary Review*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2011, pp. 21–44.

Kissane, James. “Imagery, Myth, and Melville's *Pierre*.” *American Literature*, vol. 26, no. 4, 1955, pp. 564–572.

Lewis, Paul. “Melville’s *Pierre* and the Psychology of Incongruity.” *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 15, no. 3, 1983, pp. 183–201. *JSTOR*.

Liquete, María Felisa López. “The Presence-Absence of Women in the Work of Herman Melville.” *Atlantis*, vol. 17, no. 1/2, 1995, pp. 115–126. *JSTOR*.

Lukasik, Christopher J. *Discerning Characters: The Culture of Appearance in Early America*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011, pp. 186-230.

Melville, Herman. *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*. 1852. Penguin Books, 1996.

Miles, Robert. “'Tranced Griefs': Melville's ‘Pierre’ and the Origins of the Gothic.” *ELH*, vol. 66, no. 1, 1999, pp. 157–177. *JSTOR*.

Moorman, Charles. “Melville's *Pierre* and the Fortunate Fall.” *American Literature*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1953, pp. 13–30. *JSTOR*.

Nixon, Nicola. “Compromising Politics and Herman Melville's *Pierre*.” *American Literature*, vol. 69, no. 4, 1997, pp. 719–741. *JSTOR*.

Otter, Samuel. “The Eden of Saddle Meadows: Landscape and Ideology in Pierre.” *American Literature*, vol. 66, no. 1, 1994, pp. 55–81. *JSTOR*.

Perry, Ruth. *Novel Relations: The Transformation of Kinship in English Literature and Culture 1748-1818*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Punter, David, and Glennis Byron. *The Gothic*. Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

Robertson-Lorant, Laurie. *Melville: A Biography*. University of Massachusetts Press, 1998.

Rogin, Michael Paul. *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1983.

Silverman, Gillian. “Textual Sentimentalism: Incest and the Author-Reader Bond in Melville’s Pierre.” *Bodies and Books: Reading and the Fantasy of Communion in Nineteenth-Century America*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2012, pp. 83–103. *JSTOR.*

Toner, Jennifer DiLalla. “The Accustomed Signs of the Family: Rereading Genealogy in Melville's *Pierre*.” *American Literature*, vol. 70, no. 2, 1998, pp. 237–263. *JSTOR.*

Wald, Priscilla. “Hearing Narrative Voices in Melville's *Pierre*.” *Boundary 2*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1990, pp.100–132.

Weinstein, Cindy. *Family, Kinship, and Sympathy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature.* Cambridge University Press, 2004. *EBSCOhost.*

Young-Zook, Monica M. “Sons and Lovers: Tennyson's Fraternal Paternity.” *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2005, pp. 451–466. *JSTOR.*