

## The Ambiguity of the Urban-Rural Setting and Melville's Stark Image of America in *Pierre*

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### ABSTRACT

While many critics dismissed *Pierre*'s ambiguities as one of the book's weaknesses, this paper shows that one of these ambiguities- that of the urban/rural setting- is one of the novel's points of strength. This paper argues that Melville's intentional ambiguousness about the urban/rural settings is what gives him more room to articulate his bleak prospect about America and to debunk many vaunted classic ideals and religious beliefs. In *Pierre*, the researcher contends, Melville sounds the alarm he was feeling about the enterprise of America and voices his warnings about the imminent threats his country was about to encounter.

**Keywords:** *Pierre*, Ambiguities, Bleak, Prospect, America, Urban, Rural, Ideals, Classic, Religious.

### INTRODUCTION

After the negative reception that his masterpiece *Moby Dick* had received and the subsequent decline in his popularity as a writer, Herman Melville started writing his next book *Pierre* while being in a bad mental and financial state. Melville's desperate mood, poverty, poor health conditions, and the financial crisis, Higgins and Parker (2006) claim, were among the many factors that drove Melville to write impulsively and lose control over his story (p. 164). As a result of these difficult circumstances, Melville produced a book that was complex and ambiguous to ordinary readers, so it was not received favorably. In his introduction to the Penguin edition of *Pierre*, William Spengemann (1996) states that contemporary "reviews adjudged the moral immoral, the characters unnatural, the style absurd, the story incoherent, and the author certifiably insane" (p. 8). In a fierce contemporary review against *Pierre*, a reviewer opines that the novel is "a labyrinth without a clue [...] ambiguities, indeed! One long brain-mudding, soul-bewildering ambiguity [...]. Without beginning or end

[...] and Irish bog without so much as a Jack-o-lantern to guide the wanderer's footsteps-the dream of a distempered stomach" (Wilson, 2008, p. 68). In another contemporary review on 4 August 4, 1852 in the *Boston Post*, the most popular daily newspaper in New England at the time, the famous American journalist Charles Gordon Green states that "*Pierre; or, the Ambiguities* is, perhaps, the craziest fiction extant [...] the amount of utter trash in the volume is almost infinite—trash of conceptions, execution, dialogue and sentiment. Whoever buys the book on the strength of Melville's reputation, will be cheating himself of his money [...] what the book means, we know not" (Wilson, 2008, p. 63).

Literary criticism since the late 1920s through the twenty-first century has shown that even though *Pierre* contains some lapses, incoherence in structure and style, and eccentricities in language, Melville was in good control of his writing. Michael Kearns (1983) argues that "what we would normally label as sentence-level incoherence represents authorial control in the novel. Melville seems to be asking the reader of *Pierre* either to be extremely patient with the style or [...] actively to construct a conceptual orientation that makes sense out of sentence-level incoherence" (p. 34). Carol Strickland (1976) contends that in *Pierre* there is "evidence of

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authorial control in the novel: the recurrence of certain motifs of imagery lends a degree of unity and coherence” (p. 302). Wilson (2008) reports that “Henry Murray, the Harvard psychologist, who had closely studied *Pierre*, [...], suggests [Henry Murray] that of all Melville’s novels, *Pierre* was the one that Melville had preconceived and planned more intentionally, more consciously than any others” (p. 69).

Literary criticism has given this novel new dimensions and opened new insights, which revealed its maker’s brilliance, depth, and sophistication as a writer and as a philosopher. Critical studies throughout the past eight decades have suggested that Melville intended this book for a particular audience, namely not the ordinary readers. A complex and highly philosophical, *Pierre* was most probably meant to be read by highly-educated intellectuals. The novel could be difficult for the ordinary readers because the author tends to express his thoughts and ideas in an indirect fashion. For instance, Melville’s serious views about sexuality, racism, and women are not expressed directly; rather, he expresses them with ambiguity, in a language veiled behind images and codes. Creech (1993), for example, argues that *Pierre* is full of codes through which Melville intended to hide his homosexual themes because homosexuality was a dangerous topic in the nineteenth-century American culture where there was very limited sexual freedom. Therefore, Creech (1993) avers that Melville had to use codes and disguises to cover his sexual allusions (pp. 112-17; p. 165). Indeed, Robert Milder (1974) rightly observes that *Pierre* is an “overwrought book, even a mad one” (p. 187) and that Melville had “complex intentions” in writing it (p. 186).

Among the ambiguities that permeate the novel is Melville’s representation of the urban-rural settings. On the surface, the book seems to contrast between the bucolic and urban settings, thereby adhering to the pastoral, transcendental tradition of the time. To the ordinary reader, the novel is obviously divided into two parts: the first one describes the natural, bucolic paradise

of Saddle Meadows, and the second one shows the evils of the city of Hell. Thus, on the surface the book seems to be concerned with describing Pierre’s Fall from Eden into Hell, the familiar journey from innocence to experience, which was the literary tradition of the nineteenth century. Many critics view the novel in this way. William Braswell (1950) points out that Pierre falls from a “romantic Eden” into “a world of hatred and violence” (p. 286). Howard Franklin (1963) asserts that Pierre “abandons his country paradise and enters the hellish city” (p. 100). Similarly, James Polk (1972) argues that “the city [in *Pierre*] is contrasted with Nature in a conventional way” (p. 283). However, Melville’s representation of the setting, both rural and urban, is ambiguous in two ways. First, while he seems to be celebrating the beauty of the country and condemning the evils of the city, on a deeper level, this contrast, to a certain extent, is blurred and undermined. This does not mean that he represents the city in a positive light; rather, it seems that he depicts the city as a less evil place than the country. Apart from the fact that both the country and the city are represented as hells, the city has some positive aspects that are not available in the country. Second, Melville is not precise about the city and the country settings: he does not give the actual names of the village or the city. The name of Saddle Meadows is totally contrived, and the real name and location for this country setting are not given. Similarly, Melville (1996) is ambiguous about the urban setting: New York is referred to as “the city” (p. 338). We learn that the city that is referred to in the novel is New York, because of several specific details; for example, the city to which Pierre goes is inhabited by “hundreds of thousands of human beings” (Melville, 1996, p.338). It is clear then that Melville refers to New York because at the time he wrote *Pierre* no city other than New York was inhabited by hundreds of thousands.

Melville’s deliberate ambiguousness about the country and city settings gives him more room to freely articulate his bleak prospect about the American

countryside and city in a broader way. That is, Melville is not being precise about the country or the city- he does not name the country or the city- in order to express his criticism in a universal way about America at large, not specific parts of it. This intentional ambiguousness enables him to explode certain treasured American ideals. Melville's ambiguousness about the country and the city exhibits his troubled mind and deep distress when he wrote *Pierre*. As noted above, the negative reception that *Moby Dick* had received and the subsequent decline in Melville's popularity caused him great disappointment and stress, because he felt betrayed by his audience. *Pierre* also reflects Melville's rage against his publishers who criticized *Moby Dick* harshly. Hence, this caused Melville, in *Pierre*, to voice his disillusionment with America and to debunk many cherished cultural ideologies. Melville's pessimism about his country is manifested in his ambiguous, gloomy representation of both the urban and rural settings. This paper explores Melville's ambiguous and pessimistic outlook of both the urban and rural settings and relates this to his obvious criticism of many vaunted classic ideals, including the idea that America is the blessed paradise of progress, success, dream fulfillment, opportunity, prosperity, individualism, pleasure, optimism, democracy, justice, classlessness, and equality, and religious beliefs, particularly the belief that America, long-viewed to be the blessed-by-God Promised Land, was established on following the Word of God and venerating His House.

### **Discussion**

In *Pierre*, Melville is ambiguous about the country setting. While the book abounds with pastoral descriptions that celebrate the beauty of the country, on a deeper level, he depicts the country as the land of evil and hostility. Seemingly, the book is divided into two parts: the first celebrates the countryside, and the other is concerned with condemning the city. Melville (1996) starts his book by celebrating the country and describing it as a paradise:

There are some strange summer mornings in the country, when he who is but a sojourner from the city shall early walk forth into the fields, and be 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 from it but silence, sinks into this wonderful and indescribable repose. (p. 3).

This passage tells the reader that nature is viewed by the visitor from the city as a strange place because such beauty is not known to the dwellers of the city who are used to seeing buildings and streets made of iron and concrete. Thus, the urban visitors see the country as tranquil, dormant, artificial, and, above all, mysterious. In the same passage, the narrator seems to celebrate the "brindled kine, dreamily wandering to their pastures, followed, not driven, by ruddy-cheeked, white-footed boys" (Melville, 1996, p. 3). Another passage that establishes the idea of the country-city contrast occurs when the narrator compares the country to a queen and refers to the city as "plebeian portion":

Whereas the town is the more plebeian portion [...], the country, like any Queen, is ever attended by scrupulous lady's maids in the guise of the seasons, and the town hath but one dress of brick turned up with stone; but the country hath a brave dress for every week in the year; sometimes she changes her dress twenty-four times in the twenty-four hours; and the country weareth her sun by day as a diamond on a Queen's brow; and the stars by night as necklaces of gold beads; whereas the town's sun is smoky paste, and no diamond, and the town's stars are pinchbeck and not gold. (Melville, 1996, p. 13).

However, a deeper examination of the novel reveals that the country is portrayed as an artificial paradise that harbors all kinds of evils. Saddle Meadows is a wide land consisting of "several hundred farms scattered over two parts of two adjoining countries" (Melville, 1996, p. 262). This bucolic paradise is not represented in the tradition of the romantic writings as the sacred place of liberty and optimism. Established on oppression and bloodshed, Saddle Meadows is in no way viewed as a heaven. Readers are told that Saddle Meadows came as a territory usurped from the native Indians in ruthless battles by one of Pierre's forefathers. Otter (1997) asserts that the novel abounds in allusions and images that reflect the "centuries-long struggle for literal and figurative possession of the American land" (p. 353). Otter (1997) suggests that "possession is asserted in the name of race, evoking Anglo-Saxon authority in the struggle over American land" (p. 355). The aristocratic Glendinning family, as the novel reveals, have wrested the land and positioned themselves as its kings in place of the original "Indian Kings" (Melville, 1996, p. 12). Thus, country people are robbed of their land by this arrogant family, the Glendennings.

Concerned with perpetuating her dynastic domination over this country land, Mrs. Glendinning, not only associates it with her "family pride" (Melville, 1996, p. 12), but also tries to make her son aware of the long-established superior status of the Glendinning family, she tells Pierre, "I want you to know who they are you live among; how many really pretty, and naturally-refined dames and girls you shall one day be lord of the manor of" (Melville, 1996, pp. 44-45). The prospectus owner of the vast lands of Saddle Meadows, Pierre begins to acquire and internalize the family pride his mother possesses. Melville (1996) emphasizes the fact that what has been instilled in Pierre, who is "no sterling Democrat" (p. 13), is pride even though, as it is stated earlier, "it had been the choice fate of Pierre to have been born and bred in the country" (p. 13). To Pierre, the country is always associated with his family pride: "the

beautiful country round about Pierre appealed to very proud memories" (Melville, 1996, p. 8). And "in Pierre's eyes, all its [Saddle Meadows'] hills and swales seemed as sanctified through their very long uninterrupted possession by his race" (Melville, 1996, p. 8). Pierre, in fact, exists in the past memories of his ancestors:

with Pierre that talisman touched the whole earthly landscape about him; for remembering that on those hills his own fine fathers had gazed; through those woods, over these lawns, by that stream, along these tangled paths, many a grand-dame of his had merrily strolled when a girl; vividly recalling these things, Pierre deemed all that part of the earth a love-token; so that his very horizon was to him as a memorial ring. (Melville, 1996, p. 8).

Pierre recognizes the country in a selfish, personal, and self-serving fashion. His connection with it is limited to his favorite interests. He views the country as a wide sports arena where he practices his favorite sports, including fencing and riding. Pierre's view of the country, then, is in no way reflective of its reality and real inhabitants; rather, Pierre is ignorant of and blind to the harsh reality. The tenant farmers suffer from the freezing weather where "the winters in that part of the country are exceedingly bitter and long" (Melville, 1996, p. 279). The poor tenant farmers, "whom unequal toil and poverty deform," (Melville, 1996, p. 24) live in cottages lit by "the wretched rush-lights of poverty and woe" (Melville, 1996, p. 111).

Country people of Saddle Meadows do not enjoy much freedom, for Mrs. Glendinning, in collaboration with Reverend Falsgrave, positions herself as the supreme ruler over people's behavior, morals, religion, and economic life. Not only is she the source of Reverend Falsgrave's monthly income- "[Mrs. Glendinning is the] benefactress, from whose purse came a great part of his salary" (Melville, 1996, p. 97)-, but also she is the one

who financed the building of “the beautiful little marble church” (Melville, 1996, p. 97). It is Mrs. Glendinning who decides upon the case of Delly Ulver, the daughter of a farmer who has been seduced by a man named Ned and left pregnant with a child. More, the sewing congregation, responsible for making clothes for “the poor people of the parish” and the “necessitous emigrants,” (Melville, 1996, p. 44) is under the control of Mrs. Glendinning.

However, despite their miserable living conditions and the negative, pejorative treatment they receive at the hands of the aristocrats, country people are held guilty and blameworthy just like their masters. Although Melville’s depiction of their plight engenders compassion and empathy in readers, the picture he draws of the country is un-Wordsworthian. Country people display many disrespectful conducts: they violate the privacy of their fellow neighbors and gossip insolently about each other. In addition, country people embrace their masters’ moral principles and behavioral patterns. For instance, upon learning about her pregnancy, Delly’s parents, instead of identifying with their daughter’s quagmire, inhumanely decide to dismiss her and vow never to talk to her. Further, the country is not as safe as it is usually known to be, since the villagers, out of fear and anxiety, not only have to carry lights when they go out, but also prefer to go in groups, because it is safer: “it was the custom for some of the more elderly, and perhaps timid inhabitants of the village, to carry a lantern when going abroad” (Melville, 1996, p. 61).

In the same way that Melville is ambiguous about the rural setting, so too he is about the urban setting. Although the country is seemingly portrayed as a paradise, upon a deeper examination, as detailed above, it is revealed that this paradise is artificial. Also, albeit the city is first depicted as the land of evil, violence, distress and gloom, we shall later see many of its positive aspects.

The incidents which happen to Pierre, Isabel, and Delly once they are inside the city, along with the kind of people they meet there suggest the inhospitality of the

city. When Pierre leaves Isabel and Delly by the warehouse and goes off to find the accommodation Glen Stanly prepared for him, upon coming back, he finds the two women in the middle of violent “riot” in which “they were left to its mercy” (Melville, 1996, p. 241). Pierre has to run to save Isabel from “the delirious reaching arms of a half-clad reeling whiskerando” and Delly from “two bleared and half-bloody women” who “with fiendish grimaces were ironically twitting her upon her close-necked dress, and had already stript her handkerchief from her” (Melville, 1996, p. 241). In addition, the coachmen that the three meet are unfriendly and corrupt: “hideous tribe of ogres, and Charon ferry-men to corruption and death” (Melville, 1996, p. 232). Even the policeman whom Pierre meets, not only shows the cold shoulder, but treats him with disrespect once he- the policeman- discovers the reality of Pierre’s social station. Furthermore, when Pierre meets the materialistic hotel-clerk, he learns from him that in the city “friends are their dollars”, and survival is possible only with “a purse-full of friends” (Melville, 1996, p. 243). Jean Ashton (1997) strongly recommends referring to “guidebooks and pamphlets in periodicals and descriptions of mid-century New York to a better understanding of the novel” because *Pierre* abounds with scenes and references that are “carefully grounded in historical reality” (p. 329). These scenes show how Melville depicted the chaos of the city and the dangers, such as those encountered by Isabel and Delly. Of course, Melville’s allusions to all these urban aspects reflect his criticism of the growing materialism in the American city, where the poor, like Pierre and Isabel, have no place. The city is obviously corrupted by a capitalistic system that encroaches upon the morals and ethics of its dwellers. This is also the case in the country where farmers live under the mercy of a feudal-like, exploitative system. Yothers (2011) wonders if “Melville is a fundamentally oppositional figure, standing outside his culture and alternately pouring scorn on its materialism and philistinism and being wounded by its indifference” (p. 119). Thus, both the city and the country

are inhospitable and sinister. In short, neither the country nor the city nurtures such a displaced, dispossessed group. America is clearly no place of grace for Pierre and his entourage.

However, although the “poor, penniless devils” (Melville, 1996, p. 267) of the city, with whom Pierre and his entourage have to live, are as miserable and poverty-stricken as their country counterparts; those in the city have advantages over the poor of the countryside who live under the mercy of a feudal-like system. Melville, in fact, portrays the reality of the poor in the city as less hellish than that in the country. The poor in the city are not as hopeless and apathetic as those in the country; on the contrary, they are cheerful and optimistic despite their poor living conditions. They have the willpower to find work to support their families like Charlie Milthorpe, who, out of magnanimity and solidarity not to be found in the country, pays one of Pierre’s urgent bills. This solidarity and sense of togetherness between the poor and their fellow Apostles is manifested in the episode when Frederic, Lucy’s brother, and Glen Stanley, who want to prevent Lucy from joining Pierre and his entourage, are “pinioned by twenty hands; and, in obedience to a sign from Pierre, were dragged out of the room, and dragged down-stairs” (Melville, 1996, p. 326). This solidarity and protectiveness between the poor of the city are not to be found in the country. Indeed, the Church in which Pierre and his entourage live together with the Apostles represents a safe haven for brotherhood and mutual love. This, however, is not an aspect of the church in the country, for Mrs. Glendenning, greedy and megalomaniacal, is the one who has financed and has been lord over it. Thus, although the poor in the city, like the poor in the country where “the winters in that part of the country are exceedingly bitter and long” (Melville, 1996, p. 279), suffer from “bitter winter” (Melville, 1996, p. 295), their solidarity and protective gestures towards each other are their source of warmth, strength, and optimism, an advantage over those in the country.

Depicting the countryside and the city in this

ambiguous and ominous fashion definitely gives Melville the space needed to universally voice his criticism of many classic American ideals. While Melville was thought to have romantic agendas in *Pierre*, as many critics have argued, it is this Wordsworthian image of the American countryside- allegedly the blessed paradise of success, dream fulfillment, opportunity, prosperity, individualism, pleasure, optimism, democracy, justice, classlessness, and equality- that he mocks. Similarly, his view of the American city is as bleak: he mocks his culture’s view of the American city as the land of progress, success, opportunity, democracy, classlessness, and equality. In fact, it is the “tide of change and progress” (Melville, 1996, p. 266) in the American city that Melville warns against. America no longer represents the safe haven for the oppressed, the poor, and the impoverished, as it had been for the Puritans and the Separatists who fled oppression and torture in the Old World in search of the Paradise God promised for those He elected.

To Melville, America, urban or rural, is not the Promised Land where one, through hard work, achieves success, enjoys the fruits and rewards of his/her labor, and fulfills his/her dreams in a pleasurable and autonomous life. Melville shows the American Dream, the classic American narrative, turning into an American nightmare due to an increasing capitalism, and the resulting disintegration of morals, values, and ethics. In this context, it is useful to review a short passage for John Smith, one of the first settlers who described the New World in their diaries. According to John Smith, the American Dream is about a land where one can “live exceedingly well” (Miller, Wood, & Dwyer, 1991, p. 76). In his 1616 *Description of New England*, Smith describes America as the land where one can easily advance his fortune and get generously rewarded through labor in cultivating the land:

Who can desire more content, that hath small means; or but only his merit to advance his

fortune, then to tread, and plant that ground he hath purchased by the hazard of his life? [...] what to such a mind can be more pleasant, than planting and building a foundation for his posterity, got from the rude earth, by God's blessing and his own industry? (Miller et al., 1991, p. 33).

However, in the novel, Melville belies these treasured beliefs. He states that in America, hard work barely enables one to get by: "the world actually and eternally practices [...] giving unto him who already hath more than enough, still more of the superfluous article, and taking away from him who hath nothing at all, even that which he hath" (Miller et al., 1991, p. 262). In *Pierre*, what aggravates the farmers' misery and suffering is that their land, poor and unfertile, does not yield enough crops to satisfy their needs. Worse, the land is widely covered with "catnip and amaranth," (Melville, 1996, p. 345) plants which do not suit their livestock. And their appeal to Mrs. Glendinning to "Free us from the amaranth, good lady, or be pleased to abate our rent" remains disregarded (343). The countryside contains "almost unplowed and uninhabited regions" (Melville, 1996, p. 207). While Smith believes that "here nature and liberty afford us that freely, which in England we want, or it costeth us dearly" (Miller et al., 1991, p. 34), Melville does not picture America as the land of opportunity. The poor tenant farmers, "whom unequal toil and poverty deform," (Melville, 1996, p. 24) live in cottages lit by "the wretched rush-lights of poverty and woe" (Melville, 1996, p. 111). The situation in the American city is not any better: poor citizens like "the mechanic, the day-laborer, has but one way to live, his body must provide for his body" (Melville, 1996, p. 261).

In his *letters from an American Farmer*, Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur (1735-1813), who was a friend of Benjamin Franklin, describes America as the land where one fully enjoys and has full authority over the fruits of his/her hard work, achieves individual autonomy, and fulfills his/her dreams in a better life:

[the American's] rewards of his industry follows with equal steps the progress of his labor; his labor is founded on the basis of nature, self-interest; can it want a stronger allurements? Wives and children, who before in vain demanded of him a morsel of bread, now, fat and frolicsome, gladly help their father to clear those fields whence exuberant crops are to arise to feed and to clothe them all, without any part being claimed, either by a despotic prince, a rich abbot, or a mighty lord. (Miller et al., 1991, p. 88).

The last statement of this quote foregrounds the idea that America is the land where one's hard work yields fruits and rewards for him/her alone and no one has the right to claim any part of it. Individualism, a cherished American ideal, is mocked by Melville. In the novel, the farmers suffer under the yoke of an exploitative feudal-like system where most of the fruits of their labor go to their aristocratic master Mrs. Glendinning. Further, Melville dedicates much attention to the dilemma of the Millthorpes, one of the families who live on the Glendinning land. Their life in America is characterized by misery, poverty, and failure. Commenting on this family's poverty, Pierre refers to Mr. Millthorpe as an "interesting man,[who] had, a year or two previous, abandoned an ample farm on account of absolute inability to meet the manorial rent, and was become the occupant of a very poor and contracted little place, on which was-a small and half-ruinous house" (Melville, 1996, p. 276). While Crèvecoeur states that an American can advance the fortunes of his family through hard work, Melville undermines this idea through the dilemma of this family. This family's living conditions, manifested in their poor nutrition, are emphasized by the reference to the family's daughters as "pale and delicate" (Melville, 1996, p. 279) and the mother as "thin," "feeble" (Melville, 1996, p. 277), and "sickly" (Melville, 1996, p. 279). Mr. Millthorpe is described as "old and infirm" (Melville, 1996, p. 279) and finally dies. Melville refers to his death

as “this Democrat” (Melville, 1996, p. 278), implying that only in death are such wretched families able to enjoy justice in a world, dominated by merciless and oppressive landlords, where they suffer systematic and consistent subjugation and dehumanization. Obviously, Melville here debunks the classic ideology that America was established on democracy and equal opportunity for all citizens. Actually, Melville’s critique of democracy in the American culture can be noticed in his other works, particularly his shorter tales. Richard Fogle (1960), for instance, opines that “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” is Melville’s attack on “some theories of American democracy” (p. 53). Melville, thus, demythologizes the vaunted belief that America is the land where dreams and happiness can be realized.

Of import here is that Melville also questions the national ideal that America is a classless society and that it was established on the promise of equal opportunity for all citizens. He exposes a widening gap between the upper class and the lower class. Aristocrats like Mrs. Glendenning, in her manor, and Glen Stanley, in his luxurious house in the city, live in a world of comfort and pleasure, while the lower class suffers. Mrs. Glendinnig’s avarice and lack of sympathy with the poor is evinced in her order that all tenant farmers pay their rents without delay; however, when she has to pay them their due right, she does not do so until seriously and repeatedly asked: “Pierre remembered, that when, one autumn, a hog was bought of [Milthorpe] [...] the old man never called for his money till the midwinter following; and then, as with trembling fingers he eagerly clutched the silver, he unsteadily said, ‘I have no use for it now; it might just as well have stood over’” (Melville, 1996, p. 278). This noble pride causes Mrs. Glendinning, “with a kindly and benignantly interested eye to the povertiresque,” to say: “Ah! The old English Knight is not yet out of his blood. Brave, old man!” (Melville, 1996, p. 278). The word “povertiresque” is most probably meant to suggest the aristocrats’ indifference to the impoverished classes. Further, indifferent to the suffering of the poor, Pierre,

while still living in Saddle Meadows, considers the country as a private recreational place, as noted above. In short, Pierre’s perception of the country resembles the aristocrats’ usual view of it, a place for recreation, sports, pleasure, entertainment, and relaxation. Pierre’s sentiment towards the country is not empathetic and compassionate; rather, it is egotistical, indifferent, and, above all, romantic.

Melville’s criticism of his country’s class system is not unrelated to his awareness of the growing materialism in America and the resulting destructive effects it has on values, morals, and ethics. Melville views the country as feudal-like and in the city “friends are their dollars”, and survival is possible only with “a purse-full of friends” (Melville, 1996, p. 243). Melville mocks the optimistic image of the American city as the land of progress, development, and technological advances and shows that the city has grown to be a symbol for evil materialism. Obviously, to Melville, America is not blessed by God.

The Puritans who fled from the Old World believed that God had sent them on a divine mission to the Promised Land, America. Therefore, they wanted to establish a Bible-based society because they espoused the belief that happiness could only be realized through applying the biblical teachings on all aspects of their life (Miller et al., 1991, p. 6). They aimed at establishing a society that adhered to biblical teachings and glorified the church, the House of God. Hence, America has been believed to be a land blessed by God because its inhabitants presumably followed the biblical teachings and glorified the church. However, Melville obviously suggests that the land that is covered with “catnip and amaranth,” (Melville, 1996, p. 345) and contains “almost unplowed and uninhabited regions” (Melville, 1996, p. 207) is not blessed. Also, Melville shows that America is not blessed because neither the country nor the city are safe places: country farmers, as discussed above, have to carry lanterns and walk in groups when they leave their houses because it is not safe, and inhabitants of the city don’t feel safe either, as seen in the troubles that Pierre

and his entourage experience. In fact, both country and city, in no way blessed, are represented as hellish for their dwellers.

Obviously, in the novel, Melville intentionally and repeatedly asserts that the American culture abused the church and leveraged away from the Bible and its teachings. Melville shows that the House of God, the church, is collapsing: in the country it is under the mercy of the feudal lord Mrs. Glendenning who is “the generous foundress and the untiring patroness of the beautiful little marble church,” (Melville, 1996, p. 266) and in the city it has been converted into a commercial building. Melville warns that materialism has desecrated the church and wreaked havoc in it

[The church was] built when that part of the city was devoted to private residences, and not to warehouses and offices as now, the old Church of the Apostles had had its days of sanctification and grace; but the tide of change and progress had rolled clean through its broad-aisle and side-aisles, and swept by far the greater part of its congregation two or three miles up town. (Melville, 1996, p. 266).

Melville states that “the building could no longer be efficiently devoted to its primitive purpose [which is worshipping God]. It must be divided into stores; cut into offices; and given for a roost to the gregarious lawyers” (Melville, 1996, p. 266). Further, in the novel, the biblical teachings to believers to love their neighbors are not respected by the farmers, because, as discussed earlier, they don’t respect each other’s privacy and gossip insolently about each other. While the Bible consistently urges Christians to love each other and extend love and mercy to others, we neither see this aspect in the country nor in the city. For instance, in the novel, farmers in the village gossip about Isabel and ruin her reputation without even knowing her, and Delly Ulver’s parents do not try to understand her -Delly’s- dilemma and

eventually disavow her. Also, the situation in the city is not any better: love of money, not love of others, is the top priority. In fact, love of money, in the Bible, is “a root of all evil,” because “people who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunges men into ruin and destruction” (*New International Version*, 1 Timothy. 6: 10, 9). This biblical warning against materialism is disregarded by the Americans who have grown to value money above everything else. This is probably what led Melville to directly voice his frustration with the American nation which marginalized the Word of God: “Whatever other worlds God may be Lord of, He is not Lord of this” (Melville, 1996, p. 231).

### **Conclusion**

It is obvious that Melville’s ambiguousness about the urban/rural settings is deliberate. Although, as noted above, many critics considered the seeming incoherence in structure as among the novel’s weaknesses, this study explains that it is this alleged incoherence that gives Melville the space needed to voice his criticism of and disillusionment with America. In questioning many treasured American ideals, Melville sounds the alarm about the dangers that his country is about to face. *Pierre* contains Melville’s serious concerns -the alarm he was feeling about the admirable enterprise of America (a country that was not even a hundred years old at that time). *Pierre* represents Melville urgent invitation for Americans to stop and look inside themselves and try to remember who they are and where they came from and why. *Pierre* is arguably Melville’s strident call for his nation to go back to Holy Writ and find the truth there. A superb book by all measures, *Pierre; or the Ambiguities* will continue to be Melville’s most sophisticated and philosophical masterpiece that only the very insightful readers can detect the serious messages smuggled into its lines. Although *Pierre; or the Ambiguities* is not easily accessible, yet it remains a treasure that is worth the hunt. Indeed, it is “a book of fragments, and the fragments are

worth mining and extracting?" (Mumford, 1983, p. 152).

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## غموض المكان الريفي والمدني وصورة ملفيل الصارخه لأمریکا في رواية بيير

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### ملخص

رغم أن كثيراً من النقاد اعتبروا عناصر الغموض في رواية بيير - للكاتب الأمريكي هيرمان ملفيل - نقطة ضعف في هذه الرواية، فإن هذا البحث يبين أن أحد هذه العناصر - وهو الغموض حول المكان الريفي والمدني - يعتبر نقطة قوة في الرواية. يناقش البحث كيف أن غموض الكاتب المقصود يعطيه المجال والحرية ليفصح عن رؤيته الكئيبة نحو أمريكا ويشكك بالعديد من مثلها الكلاسيكية المزعومة وبعض المعتقدات الدينية المرتبطة بها. يظهر البحث كيف أن الكاتب من خلال هذه الرواية يدق ناقوس الخطر حول المشروع الأمريكي بزمنه وحول التهديدات التي كان يوشك وطنه على مواجهتها.

الكلمات الدالة: ملفيل، بيير، نظرة كئيبة، عناصر الغموض، المكان الريفي والمدني، مثل كلاسيكية، أمريكا.

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