

A Three Part Paper presented by
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Herman Melville is an American writer of the first magnitude, whose Moby-Dick is regarded by many as the pre-eminent work of American literature, dealing with central issues of human experience with a profundity worthy of a Sophocles or Shakespeare. He is a man who used the sea and the river as the backdrop for most of his prose works and ironically when he could no longer earn a living writing was reduced to a mundane job as a customs inspector in the port of New York.

The Civil War is a tragic chapter in our national history, one which even to this day evokes the strongest of emotions and perhaps especially so in the South. It was a war whose toll in human lives still seems astronomical. It was in many ways America's entry into the age of modern warfare, gropingly and ill-prepared for the change from chivalrous knights on beautiful horses flashing swords in the sunlight.

Herman Melville and the Civil War are seldom thought of together. And yet, apart from Walt Whitman's Drum-Taps, there is no body of poetry which expresses so deeply and sympathetically the tragedy of this conflict and its results as does Herman Melville's Battle-Pieces, published in 1866.

Of Melville's poetry no less a critic than Robert Penn Warren has written (in an essay in 1958 entitled "Melville the Poet"):

"It must be admitted that Melville did not learn his craft. But the point is that the craft he did not learn was not the same craft which some of his more highly advertised contemporaries did learn with such glibness of tongue and complacency of spirit. Even behind some of Melville's failures we can catch the shadow of the poem which might have been. And if his poetry is, on the whole, a poetry of shreds and patches, many of the patches are of a massy and kingly fabric--no product of the local cotton mills."

This evening the presentation is one topic in three parts: a brief introduction to the life and work of this writer; then a historical description of the events and aspects of the war on which Melville reflected; and finally an analysis of selected portions of the poems themselves. Mr. Fairleigh will present the historical treatment of the battles in the war, and I shall introduce Melville's life and work and comment on some of his poems.

Herman Melville was born on August 1, 1819, the second son of Allan and Maria Gansevoort Melville, in New York City. Financial reverses led his once prosperous importer father to move to Albany in 1830. The father died two years later and the sons were taken out of school and put to work. Herman worked as a bank clerk, sales clerk, and schoolteacher. After another move he took a brief engineering course and worked for a newspaper, but unsuccessful attempts to find a lasting job led him finally in 1839--at the age of 20--to ship to Liverpool on the merchant ship, St. Lawrence, as a common sailor. It was his experiences on this ship which he would use as the background of his book, Redburn, published in 1849.

In 1841 Melville sailed to the South Seas on the whaler, Acushnet, which he later described as his Yale and his Harvard. He deserted the ship in the Marquesas in 1842, spent some time among the cannibal tribes of native Typees, was rescued by an Australian whaler, spent some time under arrest at Tahiti, escaped, spent some time on another whaler, and was discharged in the Sandwich Islands. Fearing being caught on charges of desertion he enlisted in the U. S. Navy aboard the frigate, United States, and returned to America. He was discharged from the Navy in 1844. All of this, and he was now 25.

Melville moved into his mother's home in upstate New York and settled down to become a writer. Soon he had published two immensely popular travel adventures about his experiences in the South Seas, Typee in 1846 and Omoo in 1847, and confirmed his decision to make writing his profession. In 1847 he also married Elizabeth Shaw, daughter of the Chief Justice of Massachusetts, and moved back to New York City, where he became part of a smart literary circle. In 1849 followed two more books, Redburn and Mardi, the latter set in a mythical Polynesian archipelago, and then in 1850, White-Jacket, based on his adventures in the U.S. Navy.

By this stage in his life, however, Melville had reached a point in his development when he was no longer satisfied with the literary circle in which he had moved and was searching more deeply into the riddle of the universe, the problems of evil and suffering and the complex nature of man. In 1850 he left New York and moved to

a farm near Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and began work on what later readers--but certainly not his contemporaries--recognized as his masterpiece and perhaps the great American novel, Moby-Dick, or The Whale, that great epic of Captain Ahab and the white sperm whale and Ishmael the narrator (Melville's own persona). By 1851 it was published, dedicated to his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was his neighbor also, to whom he wrote: "I have written a wicked book and I feel innocent as a lamb." This book, however, did not receive the acclaim of his adventure stories of the South Seas. Indeed there were a number of reviews which were contemptuously hostile, something felt very painfully by one who described himself as "far more keenly alive to censure than to praise."

After this Melville's spirits became increasingly depressed (fueled in part by his increasingly great financial difficulties). His writing became darker and darker in mood, culminating in the disillusioned and cynical The Confidence Man in 1857. (He had published Pierre in 1852, Israel Potter in 1855, and The Piazza Tales in 1856.) He had traveled in Europe and the Holy Land, had tried a time of lecturing, but eventually came near to a nervous breakdown, and his family feared for his sanity. His later works were scarcely noticed when they came off the press and the publisher of The Piazza Tales and The Confidence Man went bankrupt. It has been said that seldom has a successful author been dropped so suddenly from his pinnacle of fame. His easy writings had been popular, but his great work, that into which he had poured his deepest thoughts and most profound inspiration, had demanded more than his readers were willing to give. And so he wrote no more prose for 34 years. His final prose work, Billy Budd, was finished only a few months before his death in 1891 and only published in 1924.

In 1863 he settled again in New York City, being helped out financially from time to time by his father-in-law. In 1866 he began working as an Inspector of Customs where he remained in relative obscurity for nineteen years.

But in the meantime he began to write poetry, publishing four slim volumes, the most important of which was entitled Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War (1866),

his own personal response to the Civil War. In 1859, two years after the publication of the dark and cynical The Confidence Man, Mrs. Melville had written to her mother: "Herman has taken to writing poetry. You need not tell anyone, for you know how such things get around."

To his poetry, and more particularly to the Civil War poems, we shall return, after a description of some of the events which brought forth his literary response.