

Author's Name

Professor's Name

Course Name

Date

Literary Analysis in Melville's *The Piazza Tales*

Melville's *The Piazza Tales* is a unique collection of short stories representing a shift in the writer's intent and focus (Mande 1). The story represents modern America, which allows the audience to draw several parallels between the tales and numerous social problems pervasive during the Pre-Civil War, particularly social issues that Melville experienced. For instance, "Bartleby Scrivener" published in 1853 in Putnam, concerns Melville's frustrations with the way workforce industrialization morphed the writing business (Mande 3). Generally, the tales consist of characters, experiences, and settings drawn from the life of Melville. Melville palatably baits his readers through the use of literary devices. This essay adopts the psychological analysis method, which focuses on postulating and probing the author's intention and characters' psychological state to examine Melville's use of literary devices, including imagery, narrator's point of view, paradox and motifs.

Imagery

Cape Horn Imagery

Melville's work is a story of symbolism. Cape Horn, the Piazza, mountain, poverty, and the wall have been used as imageries. To begin with, Melville's hardship, the struggle, and nautical life surrounding Cape Horn hold a great significance. Melville introspectively mentions Cape Horn to defend his wisdom of building his own piazza on the northern side of his apartment. The narrator remembers Cape Horn by reflecting on the entirety of his difficult past

history. In 1856, Melville could reminisce the thrills of active and arduous life and also acknowledge the agony of a difficult personal life. He is a sailor turned farmer. Cape Horn symbolizes the tumultuous past which led to Melville's anguish during the 1850s.

Born in a wealthy importer family, Melville had high financial security expectations, social position, and education. The death of his father precipitated the family business to the bankruptcy, thus collapsing Melville's dream. This led him to sign as a cabin boy in a ship trading to Liverpool. He rounded Cape Horn as an initiation to sea-fairing life, a decision that marked the most difficult life of his days. He sailed for five months in steamy waters without rest. He narrates, "We had been broad upon the waters for five long months" (Melville 117). These are tough months of sickness and confinement, the languor of spirit, dullness, sleeplessness, sciatica, and eye strain. Therefore, Cape Horn reflects Melville's life challenges, trials, and experiences.

The Piazza Imagery

Secondly, the piazza has been used in the story to demarcate Melville's acceptance of retreat and escape from the most tempestuous turmoil of his life. The Piazza shows Melville's founded peace in privacy (isolation). The piazza plays a dual role in the story; first, it symbolizes philosophic cohesion. Secondly, the piazza offers the actual vantage point and images the focal point of the tales. The narrator relates his stories looking backward to the recent past events. He states, "When I removed into the country, it was to occupy an old fashioned farmhouse, which had no piazza a deficiency the more regretted, because not only did I like piazza" (Melville 1). As he explains his original desire for piazza, Melville identifies himself as a life observer. He fancifully admires the world with piazzas. He is overwhelmed by the aesthetic beauty of such a world. The piazza demonstrates aesthetics and modes of taste that isolate people and mystify

their suffering (Furrh 173). It provides the viewpoint from which the narrator discovers his peace. The piazza represents a cottage where people find happiness through solitude.

The piazza develops three important facets of romance. The introductory part of the story establishes the desired object of the narrator. The inland cruise to fairyland recounts the narrator's struggles to acquire his object of desire while examining the mountain exposes the definitive truth of the obtained object—the ineffectuality of the narrator's pursuit and baselessness of his dogmas. The piazza is also a paradox since it is written in romance format, using symbol and motif primarily to rebut the fundamental principles of romantic literature, including the pleasures of solitude, the transcendence of spirit, the authenticity of universal good, and the benevolence and beauty of nature.

In the narrator's adaptation, the tension of ideal and actual is apparent in two symbolic worlds' contrasting schisms. The farm world (real world) and the piazza in which Melville exists are strategically isolated. The two worlds are viewed from the piazza's standpoint; both are defined in the narrator's consciousness, filtered by his wishes and dogmas and colored by the narrator's imaginations.

As a motif, the piazza's fairyland is another romantic, idealistic world. To corroborate the illusory, the author espoused the fairyland metaphor, a literary device that American writers used before him. The fairyland metaphor offers a quality fairy tale of indefinite temporal-spatial remoteness to communicate individual messages of aesthetic, religious, and moral truths. Melville evokes the atmosphere of a fairy tale through the storyteller's elucidation of his physical surrounding. He appropriately discriminates his piazza as "my poppybed" (Melville, 3).

As an ideal romantic symbol, the narrator's fairy tale transpires in images of brilliance and sunlight. "... just steadily paint one small, round, strawberry mole upon the wan cheek of

northwestern hills. Signal as a candle. One spot of radiance, where all else was shade" (Melville 6). As the expectation of the narrator increases, the illusion deepens to golden imagery. "...a cheery sunrise kindled a golden sparkle in the same spot as before" (Melville 6). The imaginative narrator, on the other hand, views the golden image as the "golden mountain window, dazzling like a deep-sea dolphin" (Melville 7). Melville uses a golden hue to distinguish images of darkness and light.

Poverty Imagery

Melville also uses poverty as a symbol of hope to the political and economic elites. In his thesis "Nineteenth-Century Aesthetics and the Unmasking of Poverty in Melville's "The Piazza," Douglass Furrh outlines how political and economic elites take advantage of poverty to enrich themselves. Melville criticizes the social and economic policy of the antebellum north. The northern side was encroached by the politics of poverty. Melville exposes how the northern elites refused to acknowledge the abject poverty crippling the people. For instance, low-income Marianna is a lonesome orphan whose old house is rotting (Furrh 4). The narrator seems a blind adherent to the northern aesthetic and rhetorical constructions and overlooks Marianna's problems. Marianna lives in a dilapidated house, but the narrator assumes that the person living in that house "must be some happy one" (Melville 10).

Politicians usually hoodwink the poor by promising changes during political campaigns, but once they are elected, they do not implement any policies to change the economy. Instead, they take advantage of their positions to squander public resources. Melville distrusts the political present and suggests constructing a future discourse to help the voiceless (Lee 514). The long-standing northern poverty problem was increasing, but instead of changing the situation, the northern political elites sought picturesque to transmute into beauty sights (Furrh 5). The

politicians swept the low-income families into ruthless logic, interpreting poverty not as an economic system but as a consequence of vice. As thousands of men and women wallowing in poverty in New York, the political and economic elites were functioning more seamlessly. They depress their laborers as they make huge profits. The antebellum capitalism was maintained through politicians' greed to enrich themselves through their ignorance of low-income families' plight.

The Mountain Imagery

Melville sets out on a desperate quest to the mountain with the hope to find the evidence of his lost spiritual reality. The mountain represents the religious home, where Christians get spiritual holiness, particularly after experiencing denial, anger, and disquieting bitterness, leading to God's detachment. Melville travels to the mountain (Holy Land) to pray in order to end the darkness of his fears. The mountain allows him to view the world from a different perspective and acquire morals (Elliott 326).

Melville's quest for holiness is portrayed in three stories, including *The Sketch Eighth*, *Bartleby*, and *Benito Cereno*. These tales portray Melville as a man tangled in the throes of divine retribution, complication, and wrath. He lives by the orthodox Christianity standards. The *Benito Cereno* uses imagery to show the plight of Don Benito and God's mystery. Captain Delano observes Melville captivated in trying the most intricate constructions he has never seen before—he uses "a combination of double-bowline-knot, treble-crown-knot, back-handed-well-knot, knot-in-and-out-knot, and jamming-knot" (Melville 68). Delano keenly probes the curiosity of Melville's labor and asks him, "What are you knotting there, my man?" (Melville 68). The oblivion of the knot requires Delano to delve into introspection. The language imagery—

African, English, and Spanish suggest a communication level that encourages Delano to engage in abstract reasoning. To understand the knot, Delano has to examine his Christian conscience and spiritual strengths. This is Delano's attempt to grasp God's will, which gives the story the philosophical theme of man's isolation from God.

The Wall Imagery

Bartleby Tale is established as a symbolic physical setting reflecting the narrator's ambiguous dilemma. Melville consistently achieves this effect by using imagery of color. The office of the lawyer on Wall Street is remarkably limited to the suggestion of the wall. The two windows light the chamber. A window opens at one end of the room on to the skylight shaft's interior white wall penetrating the center of the building. The walls symbolically represent the mixture of evil and good in the moral circle. *Bartleby* is partitioned by the green screen, which differentiates it from the rest of the building, thus interrupting the basic scheme. The chambers have their interior painted gray due to the dim lighting. The extravagantly used walls in *Bartleby* emblematically represents man's limitations; the monumental barrier to human will.

Point of View

The tales are third-person limited, whereby they one character. The use of the third-person allows the author to remain an omniscient narrator. Melville uses point of view to artfully describe the narrators' critical failures, such as Amaso Delano (Donaldson 1083). For instance, *Benito Cereno* is narrated from the perspective of Captain Delano, an extremely unreliable person. Delano is a "person of a singularly undistrustful good-nature, not liable" (Melville 43). Melville successfully used third person limited to surprise readers with what they did not know about the character. Otherwise, the use of first-person would have made the stories disinteresting since readers would have been experiencing what the characters experienced.

In conclusion, Melville's *The Piazza Tales* depict the relationship between man and the desert. Melville's thesis suggests that the intrinsic suppression of the poor within the social structure of the U.S makes it impossible to achieve social reforms that can ensure equality across all classes of people. He influences readers through his wise use of literary devices such as motifs, imagery, and limited third-person points of view. Although the tales were written in 1856, the content is relevant in today's American society.

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