THE CONFIDENCE THEME

IN

<u>REDBURN</u>, <u>MOBY-DICK</u>, <u>PIERRE</u>, AND <u>THE CONFIDENCE-MAN</u>

by

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INTRODUCTION

This paper grew out of my fascination with the multi-disguised tricksters of Melville's The Confidence-Man. In the novel a Mississippi riverboat is the setting for a series of episodes in which various travellers are cheated by a number of men who hide their evil nature behind a mask of benevolence and honesty. By the end of the book, the reader is often totally confused about who is telling the truth and who is lying to gain the upper hand. One thing does remain clear, however; Melville is a master at creating confidence men, types who present spurious exteriors in order to lead other men astray. This figure, the man of masks, is extremely provocative to the reader because he symbolizes all that makes life difficult for mankind: uncertainty, deception, and ambiguity. He brings to mind the distressing fact that illusion often covers up life's essential misery with a pleasing veneer.

My initial intention was to examine several of Melville's novels in order to discover whether he makes use of the confidence man character in other situations. The trickster is a common type in American folklore; an assessment of his role in Melville's novels might prove valuable to understand some of Melville's attitudes toward his home

environment. But as I undertook the task, I began to discover that it is not the beguiling, smiling, elusive character himself who is most significant in Melville's works but, rather, what he attempts to elicit from his victims--confidence. It was this "confidence" which I decided to define in Melville's writings.

In order to achieve his purpose, a trickster must gain the trust of his prey. He must be sure that his victims both rely on him and accept him as genuine, for without this commitment he cannot make them believe his words. The establishment of a bond between the confidence man and his victim can be considered prototypical of an occurrence essential to existence; as a man reacts with his environment, whether it be the natural or the social world, he must decide how he is to respond to it. Adjustment to the social world is by no means easy, as the confidence artist proves. Not all men can be believed, because they may be hiding their true feelings and desires. Thus, each man must question each individual he encounters since no man can absolutely depend on others. One escape from this predicament would be to become anti-social, but no one can exist completely alone. Moreso, isolation, if it is self-imposed, involves the rejection of love, a much-needed emotion in an enigmatic universe. Thus, shunning of the social world is out of the question. Men must face other men; therefore, they must concern themselves with the

confidence dilemma. They must learn when to trust others and when not to.

When a man examines the natural world he finds all the same perplexities which make the social world exasperating. One never knows what is causing the ugliness he sees around him. Each event leaves a man wondering. How can he feel at ease in a world filled with malicious creatures and destructive forces such as disease and storm? Moreso, how can he accept this horror when he has no idea who or what causes it to exist? Nothing, it seems, gives Nature meaning except men, themselves. The universe remains ambiguous and unpredictable despite man's attempts to fathom it. Thus, each individual must prepare himself for the possibility that the universe's mysterious workings will lead him into a confusing or even catastrophic situation.

Even though most of the questions seem to be unanswerable, men persist in asking them. Comfort is difficult to obtain in a universe in which a demonstration of confidence in anything is a risk; nevertheless, men continue to seek insights which will assist them in favourably judging mankind and Nature. In fact, every situation demands that men decide whether to accept or reject, trust or distrust, believe or disbelieve. Hence, men continually endeavour to reach a state of confidence.

Melville does not confine his analysis of man's need for confidence to The Confidence-Man. Because he is a

writer concerned with the way men respond to the enigmas of the universe, the confidence theme is integral to his works. To what extent do Melville's novels deal with confidence, with characters and situations that can be considered in terms of reliance, trust, acceptance, belief, trickery, and their expression? This paper attempts to find out.

The four novels, Redburn, Moby-Dick, Pierre, and The Confidence-Man were chosen because they come closest to embodying most of Melville's major ideas. Such characters as the innocent, the quester, the sceptic, the self-reliant, and the confidence-man are all presented, each with their different attitudes toward confidence. Their stances are examined in relationship to several contrasting ideas, particularly: trust and no trust; appearance and reality; and the ideal and the actual.

In Redburn and Pierre the initiation pattern is discussed in order to demonstrate how Melville assesses the effect of experience on one's confidence. Here, the discovery that appearance often cloaks reality and that the actual is far less pleasing than the ideal is a major influence on each protagonist's state of trust. In Moby-Dick various characters offset each other by displaying different attitudes toward confidence. It is in this novel that Melville examines many aspects of his confidence theme. On board the Pequod, Ahab is the distruster who seeks certainty while the first-mate, Starbuck, stands opposed to his captain's monomanic

pursuit of truth. Then there is Ishmael, who seeks a balanced personality by trying to reconcile life's opposites. Each character on the whaling ship is a foil for others; therefore, all ideas and characteristics are intensified. Finally, in The Confidence-Man, attitudes and characters similar to those of the other three novels are brought together in a frenzied, convoluted panorama. The novel reflects back on all that has gone before with a heightened, almost insane urgency. It stands as a chaotic, yet thought provoking conclusion to the works that have preceded it.

As the ensuing discussion will reveal, the "confidence" approach to Melville's works is merely another one of the numerous perspectives that can shed light on them. There are, undoubtedly, countless ways of examining Melville--his approach to evil, his approach to God, and so on. However, It is hoped that the "confidence" approach will center upon the issues which continue to provoke comment about Melville's novels.

CHAPTER I

REDBURN

Redburn uses a motif which Melville reused in various altered forms in other novels. This pattern involves a man's initiation into the knowledge of various forms of evil--deception, malice, brutality, neglect, and corruption--to name a few. Redburn develops in three stages: Melville begins with a portrait of an innocent individual, Redburn, who is unaware of much of man's evil; he then depicts a series of encounters which make his hero aware of evil; finally, he closes the novel with a consideration of how his hero attempts to reconcile himself to his newly discovered world. Simply, Redburn's baptism is presented in three parts: innocence, encounter, and reconciliation. An analysis of each of these parts gives considerable insight into Melville's initiation theme.

In Melville's first attempt as a novelist at the initiation motif, young Wellingborough Redburn undertakes an eye-opening voyage from New York to Liverpool aboard the merchant vessel, Highlander. The actual journey to England and back to America is only a metaphor for Redburn's voyage of experience and discovery, however. Aboard ship and amidst Liverpool's squalor, the youthful traveller meets individuals

and witnesses sights which make him aware of the atrocities that are part of life. Every incident after Redburn leaves the safe confines of his country home educate him to the ugly facts of life.

Redburn's introduction to life's harsher side and his eventual attitude toward it can be related to other Melville novels through the "confidence" theme. In Redburn confidence is an all-encompassing term for the trust, reliance, and acceptance each individual is prompted to show in some degree toward his environment. Every time a man confronts humanity, he must decide carefully whether or not to show trust in what he sees. This dilemma is particularly relevant to Redburn since he, in several cases, must choose between trust and no trust for the first time. As Redburn quickly learns, some scenes are so ugly that his first prompting is to escape into himself rather than to attempt any choice. Acceptance of mankind is made even more difficult by the existence of seemingly honest men who cheat their victims by using a false exterior of trustworthiness. Because the possibility of trickery or some other form of evil always exists, each man who becomes involved with another man must decide whether or not to believe in him. The choice is rarely easy since incidents of deception arise with such regularity and with such subtlety that it is sometimes impossible to discern whether one faces an honest man or a masterfully misleading scoundrel.

As a man interacts with others, then, he is faced with an immensely difficult choice between trust and scepticism. Sights of natural catastrophe, human misery, and carefully disguised malice convince him that the universe cannot be seen as all good; therefore, he must be able to judge when to accept and when to reject others. For an innocent like Redburn though, unaware of the way in which men use society's decorous trappings of good will and uprightness to cover up their evil-mindedness, the course of action is most perplexing. At the beginning of his journey Redburn tends to display confidence in almost every instance because he lacks the enlightenment which experience can bring. However, as he becomes involved with the base world and discovers that all is complex, deceptive, and ambiguous, it becomes increasingly difficult to accept life at face value. Few issues, he learns, are clear-cut black and white; no idea, man, not the Universe, in fact, is predictable. Since nothing is ever certain, as Redburn loses his naivete he realizes that confidence, the one way in which he can indicate reconciliation with the external, is often an impossible stance.

Despite the difficulty of doing so, each man is constantly forced to reveal his attitude toward men and nature. Unfortunately, the loss of innocence brings only partial awareness. A man might see that the world is not what he thought it was in his youth, but before he can

completely develop, he must decide how he is to cope with this knowledge. This necessity to act upon newly acquired insight is an essential aspect of Redburn. The young traveller, a representative of everyone who has ever been disillusioned by the cold, hard facts of life, must establish some way of expressing confidence in the ever-mysterious Universe which for the most part seems exceedingly ugly.

In Redburn the confidence theme and the initiation motif are inextricable. Each stage of Redburn's baptism affects his confidence; hence, by following Redburn through his initiation it is possible to analyze the novel's perspectives on confidence.

Melville begins his novel by describing Redburn as a youth already embittered by misfortune. He is upset by the hardships forced on his family after his father's death. Even going to sea has lost much of its romantic colouring since the young man must undertake the voyage for the practical purpose of earning a living. Because he is still unaware of all the world's suffering, Redburn displays an overblown bitterness toward his lot. As a young man faced with misfortune for the first time, he unwittingly overreacts to his situation. He believes that he has been cheated and that there is no escape from his dreary existence. Just before he leaves home to undertake his first sea journey Redburn laments that it had been

> with a heavy heart and full eyes, that
> my poor mother parted with me; perhaps

> she thought me an erring and a wilful boy, and perhaps I was; but if I was, it had been a hard-hearted world and hard times that had made me so. I had learned to think much and bitterly before my time . . .[1]

Redburn is so depressed by his unlucky state that he sees no escape from it.

> Talk not of the bitterness of middle-age and after-life; a boy can feel all that, and much more, when upon his young soul the mildew has fallen; and the fruit, which with others is only blasted after ripeness, with him is nipped in the first blossom and bud. And never again can such blights be made good; they strike in too deep, and leave such a scar that the air of Paradise might not erase it. (11-12)

This stance of despondency indicates Melville's re-structuring of the conventional initiation pattern. Redburn is no longer that innocent who had believed in a totally joyous universe merely because he knew no other. Because he fosters an intense cynicism about his fortune, Redburn needs to be educated about the way all humanity must suffer. He talks as if he has seen all the woes that are to be seen in the world; but, as his journey proves, he is only fooling himself. His bad luck is negligible compared to the misery that many others must face. As the story unfolds, Melville links the general to the specific: he creates an antithesis between one poor boy and countless

[1]Herman Melville, Redburn, Standard Edu. V, (New York: Russell and Russell, 1963), p. 10. All other quotations from this edition will be noted textually by page number.

numbers who endure worse hardships. It seems fitting that a man who overemphasizes his own pain should be made aware of just how conditions can be.

Redburn's hardened nature at the beginning of his excursion gives him the resilience with which to withstand his scathing baptism. During his journey the young traveller must clean pig pens, endure the bullying of rude sailors, observe disease, poverty, and brutality, and survive deception. Only a character like Redburn, who already believes life is bitter, could possibly survive so much degrading experience. The innocent might collapse under the strain (as does Harry Bolton on his trip to America as a novice seaman), but Redburn's youthful distemper seems to carry him through.

Redburn displays an ability to witness some ugly scenes without turning his eyes away in complete disgust; but, unlike Melville's later novels Moby-Dick and Pierre, Redburn does not contain an extensive analysis of its hero's personal reaction to his environment. Undoubtedly, Redburn does react to and is influenced by the world he confronts but Melville never goes into depth with his protagonist's inner workings or his character change. The greatest emphasis in the novel is placed on what Redburn sees; if any discussion arises it is of a general, almost sociological, nature. Many times Redburn appears to be a foreign correspondent (or tourist) reporting the injustice and misery he

encounters on his journey. Using the initiation and quest motifs concurrently, Melville is able to undertake two endeavours. On one hand he demonstrates the effect on the innocent mind of a voyage into the corrupt social world, while on the other hand he is able to develop powerful social criticism from his hero's interaction with the often foul world. As Redburn discovers evil, so too does the reader. The double thread of the personal and the social prompts R.B. Lewis to note that "the emphasis in Redburn is perhaps less upon what happens to the boy himself than upon the wretchedness and depravity that are uncovered as existing independently of him in the world."[2]

The opening pages of Redburn make it clear that Redburn is no longer the absolute innocent; however, Redburn's recollection of his youthful dreams suggests that there was a time when he was able to think of the world as exciting and full of opportunity. His account of his childhood fantasies establishes an image which contrasts, and therefore heightens, the hardships he later faces. In addition, the marked difference between what Redburn imagines and what he eventually observes accentuates how easily men can delude themselves about the actual nature of reality.

As a youngster, Redburn displays many of the attributes of a normal child, that perfect innocent. He

[2]Lewis, The American Adam (London: University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 136.

entertains romantic visions of foreign lands and the sailing life. Just as any boy might, Redburn places great significance on the strange. Exotic ocean voyaging and exploring are idealized by the young mind which is never tempered by actual experience. As a child Redburn is full of confidence about the world he has never seen and he uses his vivid imagination to glorify it. He recalls his "young inland imagination" (10) not yet dampened by the often frightening and revealing events of real life. The word "inland" suggests the safety of the landed, security of Redburn's youth. The harmony of this state contrasts with the torment created by the piercing experiences that Redburn later undergoes on his sea voyage into the unknown. Lewis suggests that "Going to sea, both in deed and in symbol, was always Melville's way of fronting what Thoreau called 'the essential facts of life'."[3] As a boyish dreamer Redburn is unaware of all the "facts". For him ship advertisements "possessed a strange romantic charm . . ." (2). In fact, his whole conception of sea life is built upon the heightened perceptions of his younger days. Each memory shows Redburn's flight from reality:

> As I grew older my thoughts took a larger flight, and I frequently fell into long reveries about distant voyages and travels, and thought how fine it would be to be able to talk about remote and barbarous countries . . . (4)

[3]Lewis, p. 142.

Redburn's romantic view of distant countries and sailing is fortified by various curios and art objects in his home. His outlook is directed toward the ideal by "several oil-paintings and rare old engravings" belonging to his father. Since the paintings romanticize a world that Redburn has never seen, he delights in them. He mentions their appealing qualities, as when he describes one depicting some fishermen that "looked old and mellow" (5)". He also recalls one which shows three French men-of-war "sailing through a bright blue sea, blue as Sicily skies" (5). These paintings with their sensual colours and textures do much to whet Redburn's appetite for the sea. The youngster never realizes at this early age that the scenes created by the artist in the paintings may be ideal. He is too full of wonder and too inexperienced to understand this subtlety of art. The possibility that the illustrations are not entirely realistic is suggested by Redburn's observation that the crews of the French battleships had "something undefinable in their hands" (5). The observer cannot tell what the sailors could be holding--muskets or some other deadly weapon. Reality has been adjusted and blurred by the artist to serve his needs, but this fine point matters little to Redburn, who likes the picture as a whole with its ideal and romantic sentiment. Defining the details omitted by the artist could change the complexion of the entire painting; it is only when Redburn

actually goes to sea that he realizes the vital importance of those fine points, with all their harsh accuracy.

As soon as his journey begins Redburn is forced to leave his childhood dreams and misconceptions far behind. The world he encounters leaves him no choice but to grow up. Like all men who become involved with life, Redburn must continue to withstand each new grim experience if he is to develop as a human being since, as Melville believes, "in order to achieve moral maturity, the individual had to engage in evil and suffer the consequences."[4]

Redburn quickly "engages in evil" at the outset of his voyage when he meets a slick money grubber, the commander of the _Highlander_, Captain Riga. This fellow, as Redburn soon learns, is a confidence-man who uses a disguise and ironic talk to gull his victims. His appearance in _Redburn_ suggests Melville's early concern with disguises, a technique which reaches its climax in _The Confidence-Man_. Riga is a phony and a cheat who outwits Redburn at the start and end of his voyage. When Melville's hero first meets the sea-man, the captain is handsomely attired. Redburn recalls, "He was a very fine-looking man, about forty, splendidly dressed, with very black whiskers, and very white teeth, and what I took to be a free, frank look out of a large hazel eye. I liked him amazingly" (17). The captain reinforces

[4]Lewis, p. 142.

Redburn's estimation of him when he converses with him and his friend, Mr. Jones, in a very civil manner. In his suave way he tells the green youngster that the sea life is very rigorous, but Redburn can hardly believe this as he looks at the captain's sumptuous cabin. He relates, "But when I looked round at his comfortable, and almost luxurious cabin, and then at his handsome care-free face, I thought he was only trying to frighten me . . ." (18). Redburn's misunderstanding proves to be painfully ironic as the captain's words, seemingly spoken as a polite warning, soon prove to be true. As penalty for his folly, Redburn must undergo the hardships of true sea life.

During the first meeting between Redburn and the captain, it becomes increasingly evident that Riga is a trickster. When Mr. Jones, Redburn's friend, lies about the young man's ancestry, Riga turns the lie to his own advantage, stating that Redburn needs no advance salary because he is from a well-to-do family. From this point onward, the captain becomes less and less like the image first projected. While at sea Redburn attempts to be polite and visit the captain, only to be totally shunned. Alerted by the captain's lack of manners, Redburn begins to see beneath the captain's mask:

> . . . I noticed that while we were at sea, he wore nothing but old shabby clothes, very different from the glossy suit I had seen him in at our first interview . . . I put him down as a sort of imposter; and while ashore, a gentleman on false pretences . . . (90-91)

Riga is a confidence-man. Initially, he fools Redburn into thinking that he is a decent, upstanding seaman, but once the young sailor has committed himself the rogue drops his spurious exterior. Thus, Redburn receives his first indication that everything in the world is not what it appears to be.

Riga is not Redburn's only example of corruption aboard the Highlander. The novice seaman learns quickly that his childhood thoughts about working on an ocean vessel are well off the mark. He discovers that sea-life is extremely miserable. Most importantly, he finds that the sailors are a mob. It is through Redburn's involvement with the crew of the Highlander that Melville makes the novel's most crucial observation: evil does exist and only man's uncanny ability to hide it prevents it from being more evident in the social world. On board the merchant vessel the sailors use none of the subtle cover-ups which make unpleasant situations seem pleasant. From the outset of his voyage Redburn, in his innocence, is a target for the brutal, animal-like sailors. Even after he has matured as a seaman, he is still ostracized by the crew. At times the sailors are congenial, usually after their fair share of alcohol, but they seem to find pleasure in bullying the weak and the helpless, as when on the return trip from Liverpool to New York they are heartless in their treatment of Harry Bolton. Their law-of-the-jungle actions suggest

that without society's restricting conventions to control them, men lose much of their decency. This leads to the conclusion that man's essential evil is restrained by elaborate laws and decorum. Some men, like Riga, are better at hiding their vice than others but, stripped of their masks (as the sailors on the *Highlander* are), most men would reveal some evil. In *Redburn* Melville suggests this by presenting almost every aspect of man's darker side, especially on board the *Highlander* where evil clearly outweighs good.

One man in particular on the *Highlander*, Jackson, appears to be the distillation of evil. He is described as having a strange power:

> . . . he had such an overawing way with him, such a deal of brass and impudence, such an unflinching face, and withal such a hideous-looking mortal, that Satan himself would have run from him. (72)

As Newton Arvin points out, Redburn's

> feelings about the sailors vacillate it is true; as individuals he finds some of them generous and friendly; but taking them in the lump, he is conscious chiefly of their drunkenness, their profanity and obscenity, their indurated cynicism and sneering misanthropy. All this accumulated evil, indeed is focused . . . concentratedly in the figure of one man, the sailor Jackson . . .[5]

Jackson is diseased, ugly, and weak but he controls

[5]Newton Arvin, "*Mardi*, *Redburn*, *White Jacket*," *Melville: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Richard Chase (N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1965), p. 27.

the crew. The sailors seem to recognize that he is an extension of the evil that is part of their souls; as a result, their relationship with him is often quite strange. Jackson is the devil incarnate, whose evil "squinting eye was as good as a knockdown . . ." (71). The crew submits to Jackson--they almost treat him like an idol. With this depressing fact, Melville insinuates that evil has an inscrutable power which, in some instances, far outweighs that of good. By making the point (through Jackson) that wickedness is an extremely forceful element among men, Melville adds to his confidence theme a frightening implication: any man who shows trust in others is taking a huge risk since there is a better than even possibility that he is dealing with someone who is evil. And, as Captain Riga proves through his disguises, that corruption is not always easily discernable.

Liverpool offers Redburn no escape from the disappointment of the ocean voyage. In the British seaport his childhood visions of exotic lands are quickly shattered. After seeing a row of warehouses along the English shoreline he narrates,

> There was nothing strange; nothing extraordinary about them. There they stood; a row of calm and collected warehouses; very good and substantial edifices, doubtless, and admirably adapted to the ends had in view by the builders; but plain, matter-of-fact warehouses, nevertheless, and that was all that could be said of them. (162)

For his first view of a foreign land, Redburn

witnesses a pragmatic, "matter-of-fact" scene far different from that of his youthful dreams. This shock could provide ample opportunity for lengthy philosophizing, but the young sailor states tersely instead:

> To be sure, I did not expect that every house in Liverpool must be a Leaning Tower of Pisa, or a Strasbourg Cathedral; but yet, these edifices, I must confess, were a sad and bitter disappointment to me. (162)

The pattern of observation and brief comment displayed in this incident is one of the major characteristics of Redburn. In this case, Redburn admits his regret at finding Liverpool to be less than wondrous, but he does not become immobilized by disillusionment. One of Melville's later characters, Pierre, is to become transfixed by despair, but Redburn continues with his explorations, taking a closer look at the city of misery and giving the reader more glimpses of its wretchedness. Thus, Melville's social panorama is broadened by Redburn's fortitude. The young traveller's knack of taking the shattering of his childhood illusions in his stride gives the novel a fundamental rhythm. Be he a knight, a warrior or a simple lad, Redburn is destined to survive and to relate his experiences.

It is fortunate that Redburn has resilience because Liverpool is a wretched city. Want and suffering are everywhere. Left to their own means by more fortunate souls, people are reduced to professional beggars;

> Every variety of want and suffering here meet the eye, and every vice showed here its victims. Nor were the marvellous and almost incredible shifts and strategems of the professional beggars wanting to finish this picture of all that which is dishonourable to civilisation and humanity. (239)

Always close to starving, the paupers must resort to every device in order to survive. Redburn notes that the general misery was

> diversified by instances of peculiar suffering, vice, or art in attracting charity, which, to me at least, who had never seen such things before, seemed to the last degree uncommon and monstrous. (240)

Clearly, Redburn is disgusted with a situation in which people are forced to become artful in order to eat. Moreso, his search for confidence is made even more difficult--in the streets of Liverpool are starving individuals who must become confidence-men so that they can trick people out of a few pennies; however, these beggars, in contrast to Riga, have legitimate claims on his sympathy and his pocketbook.

Redburn's attempts to alleviate some of the suffering he encounters prove to be totally pointless. This failure adds to his mounting disgust. In one case, while wandering the less attractive quarters of Liverpool, Redburn comes upon a starving mother and her children huddled in the basement of a warehouse. Local people and authorities turn an indifferent eye toward him when he tries to get help for them. Even though he eventually gets some water for the

destitute family his endeavour is futile. By keeping these people alive he is only prolonging their agony. Shortly after he leaves these starving creatures, Redburn discovers that they have died and been removed from their hiding place. The entire injustice and cruelty of the situation prompt him to say,

> Surrounded as we are by the wants and woes of our fellow-men, and yet given to follow our own pleasures, regardless of their pains, are we not like people sitting up with a corpse, and making merry in the house of the dead? (237)

At this point in his tale, Redburn has lost all confidence in men. He has been tricked by Riga, shunned by the barbaric sailors, and disgusted by Liverpool's depravity. Each dismal event has made him an isolated traveller who can place faith in no one; however, Melville does not leave the reader with a gloomy picture of a man stripped of innocence and faith by life's harshness. Instead Redburn's transition from disgust with men to his reconciliation with them, as symbolized by his acceptance of Harry Bolton, provides Melville with an opportunity to demonstrate how and why a man must eventually tolerate and depend on society despite its depravity.

Harry Bolton, the young rascal whom Redburn meets in Liverpool, gives Redburn an opportunity to re-establish some of the trust that he has lost during his voyage. Because he is not a picture of virtue, Harry is a perfect figure for

Redburn to befriend. By accepting him, Redburn symbolically expresses confidence in a world which constantly disgusts him. Undoubtedly, the young sailor is so lonely that he must drop his reservations and become involved with a corrupt individual. Melville here implies that every man must eventually make the decision to accept imperfection or face immense isolation. Despite the possible danger in doing so, men must eventually express confidence in others. Still, as Redburn indicates, this commitment cannot always be total. Harry inundates Redburn with stories of wealth and the fashionable life to the point that he admits,

> . . . though I drowned all my suspicions as well as I could, and ever cherished toward Harry a heart loving and true: yet, in spite of all this, I never could entirely digest some of his imperial reminiscences of high life. I was very sorry for this; as at times it made me feel ill at ease in his company; and made me hold back my whole soul from him; when, in its loneliness, it was yearning to throw itself into the unbounded bosom of some immaculate friend. (288)

Redburn clings to his desire to place confidence in something perfect, something "immaculate" in spite of the ugly scenes he has witnessed. But by accepting Harry even though he is sceptical of his true character, Redburn is, for the first time on his voyage, realizing that ideal hopes must be forgotten if one is to have any companionship at all. Independence might protect a man from the guiles and corruptions of others but, sooner or later he must unite with his fellows despite their frailty or else he will suffer

through a life of singular loneliness. Thus, by choosing Harry as his comrade, Redburn admits, as almost every man must, that he cannot exist forever as an outsider.

Eventually, Harry and Redburn share an interdependence which supports the hypothesis that in order to survive comfortably in the ambiguous, shifting social world men must rely on each other. In spite of his carefree and aristocratic appearance, Harry is not very wise. He admits to Redburn that he has already lost his fortune by squandering it on the rich life; in addition, a trip to London, supposedly meant to alleviate Harry's situation, is a failure. Harry obviously needs Redburn who, although not completely judicious, has learned much from his voyage. When the pair return to New York aboard the _Highlander_, Harry, as a novice seaman, relies on Redburn more than ever. Redburn, too, requires Harry's comradeship to relieve his loneliness. Thus, without each other both men would undergo hardship, Harry from inexperience and Redburn from isolation, but together the two men are strong enough to endure. Hence, they serve as the perfect example of man's necessity for his brother's sympathy and assistance.

Even though Redburn befriends Harry and symbolically becomes involved with imperfect humanity, other incidents and characters in _Redburn_ imply that such acceptance will not always be helpful. At times trust of men can be disastrous, as Redburn's confidence in Captain Riga proves. The

contrast between Riga and Harry Bolton suggests that sometimes trust depends a great deal on luck. At certain times, only the person with an astute and sceptical eye can properly judge other men. Unless one wishes to remain totally distant from others, he must place some confidence in them in spite of their obvious shortcomings. Nevertheless, this cannot be a total belief because if one takes this stance he will be victimized again and again, as is Redburn in the initial part of his journey. Undoubtedly, an extremely careful practice of fluctuating confidence (wherein trust, reliance or acceptance is displayed if the situation warrants it) is necessary if a man is to exist in the world without being tricked by less honourable fellows.

On the return trip aboard the <u>Highlander</u> Redburn grows even closer to Harry as the pair share the pain of similar experiences. Like the pre-voyage Redburn, Harry has no idea what to do with his life. Redburn sympathizes with him. At one point he sums up his feelings about his friend's dilemma:

> It was a puzzling question, and full of grief to me, who, young though I was, had been well rubbed, curried, and ground down to a fine powder in the hopper of an evil fortune, and who therefore could sympathise with one in similar circumstances. (360)

Here, Redburn realizes that he is not alone in his suffering--this insight is a huge step toward the awareness

that because all men (plagued as they are by mystery, elusiveness and ambiguity) experience hardship, they should help each other to overcome their misery. The friendship between Harry and Redburn proves this and, by inference, the reader can determine that similar bonds would help all men.

Redburn appears to be moving toward a final statement about man's need for brotherhood until the Highlander docks in New York. When Redburn and Bolton arrive in the American city, the novel takes a turn which suggests that although Redburn sympathises with Harry's predicament, he is not willing to commit himself totally to his friend's welfare.[6] After Harry leaves the Highlander in New York, he is without a job and is friendless except for Redburn. Redburn's ensuing treatment of Harry suggests that he has been immersed further into the world's evil than he realizes. It seems that while at sea Harry's problem about his future existed on a theoretical level; hence, it was easy for Redburn to feel empathy toward Harry. In New York, however, Redburn is faced with the more diffiuclt task of actually helping Harry.

Redburn's first act of friendship on shore is to leave Harry alone while he goes to visit his friend Mr.

[6]H. Bruce Franklin, "Redburn's Wicked End," NCF, XX, 1965/1966, pp. 190-194.

Jones to catch up on family business. Subsequently, he learns from Jones that he must go home immediately. When he returns to Bolton, he discovers his companion in a state of dispair which prompts him to say, "Left to himself, the strange streets seemed now to have reminded him of his friendless condition . . ." (391). But Harry is not friendless--he has Redburn. Neither party seems to realize this fully, especially Redburn. While on his journey he has been more than happy to befriend Bolton, but now, back safely in his homeland, Redburn does not need the man who saved him from his wretched loneliness. More than ever, however, Bolton requires help. But Redburn is unable to see Harry's desolation. If Redburn were a true friend he could stay with Harry until he is employed. Or he could invite him home. Redburn does neither; instead, he leaves Harry with a Mr. Goodwell, who is supposed to find him a job. Even though aware of Harry's impulsive and insecure nature, Redburn does not stay with his companion; rather, he leaves him jobless and friendless. Consequently, as Redburn finds out, Harry fails in New York and goes to sea again. There he falls overboard and drowns. Thus Redburn's unwillingness to go out of his way to assist a friend results in a tragedy that might have been avoided. It seems that Redburn has become as callous as the sailors and Englishmen he scorned.

Until the New York scene Melville seems to be showing

the reader how a man might develop a viable reconciliation with an evil and chaotic world. Redburn's relationship with Harry shows the way, but Melville's optimistic implications are suddenly replaced by an ultimately pessimistic conclusion. After seeing Redburn progress from a bitter outsider to a somewhat trusting friend, the reader watches him demonstrate indifference equal to any seen in the book. Thus, the novel ends with the perplexing question, "Why does Redburn act the way he does?" Several interpretations are available, some adding to the apparent gloom of the novel and others alleviating it somewhat. Indubitably, Redburn has been touched by the evil he has encountered. It is only at the end of his voyage that he demonstrates to what extent he has been hardened. Perhaps the now-educated voyager has witnessed enough futility to prevent him from trying to be overly brotherly. After failing as he did with the starving family in Liverpool, he might see no purpose in being benevolent again; hence, he has acquired a fatalism which prevents him from assisting anyone unless there is a reasonable chance of success. In this case, Redburn could be considered a sadder and a wiser man who is aware of the ridiculousness of trying to be kind. This perspective lessens the pessimism about Redburn's stance since it suggests that he has grown in stature, or, at least, that he is no longer innocent; however, as an overall social comment,

Redburn's fatalism is extremely grim. It implies a senseless world bereft of the possibility of improvement.

Even though Redburn can be viewed as a man made callous by harsh experiences, it is impossible to overlook the fact that he is a hypocrite and, therefore, as tainted as most other men. Throughout the voyage he makes incisive social comments; but as the final scene proves, he does not practise what he preaches. In one instance, after he discusses the plight of the seamen, he challenges the reader to help those wretched souls: "Will you throw open your parlours to him; invite him to dinner?" (178). Confronted with opportunity to offer Harry the comforts of his abode, Redburn seems to forget his own words. He never mentions the possibility that Harry might come home with him but, instead, insists that Harry remain friendless and alone.

It is difficult to tell whether Redburn, at the end of his journey, is a wiser man who realizes that he cannot help Harry or whether he is a hard, uncaring soul who rejects men unless he needs them. Two things, however, are clear. Redburn is influenced by his environment, and he does establish a different attitude toward mankind. Even though its hero does regress at its conclusion, *Redburn* does follow a spiritual death-rebirth pattern whereby the central figure loses much of his faith in mankind and then regains some of it. Redburn does replace his bitter non-confidence with a limited confidence and acceptance. He learns from Riga that

not all men can be trusted--only a few, like Harry, are reliable. This truth, although it does nothing to relieve the ambiguity of most situations, does prevent Redburn from becoming an inflexible misanthrope. After his gruelling baptism, the young man realizes that total dependence on others is madness. Ironically, Redburn himself proves this. By changing suddenly at the end of his adventure, he indicates that men are not constant, reliable or easily understandable. They fluctuate from day to day and from situation to situation.

Redburn's encounter with men and his somewhat ambiguous reconciliation with them reveals how difficult it is to establish confidence in the social world. As Redburn learns (and then demonstrates), mankind cannot totally trust the rest of humanity. Men are too complicated and deceptive to warrant a total reliance on them. The social cosmos, not the natural one, is Melville's target in Redburn, and it becomes evident that it is an intricate realm of masked evil. Clearly, life is precarious, a tightrope on which one must make decisions about trusting what he sees. Only after the choice has been made can the truth ever be known--unless, like the early Redburn, one refuses to choose. Instead of placing some confidence in mankind, instead of accepting the world as being imperfect and being sagaciously sceptical of it, one can remain a man of non-confidence who never has to sacrifice his own safety in order to help others. But, as

Redburn's initiation suggests, if one wishes to be educated by life's "essential facts", he must be prepared to make some commitment to men.

CHAPTER II

MOBY-DICK

Unlike Redburn, which can be considered as little more than an expose of the social evil's of Melville's day, Moby-Dick is presented on a grander scale which includes comments on both the social and natural worlds. Throughout the novel several characters display various confidence attitudes during their interaction with man and Nature. Eventually, one figure, Ishmael, who is a grown up version of Redburn, emerges as the man most enlightened by his experiences; consequently, he represents some of the most outstanding aspects of Melville's confidence theme.

At times, Moby-Dick appears to be a lengthy metaphysical treatise. Such epic questions as "Does God exist?", "What is the nature of reality?", and "Is the Universe actively hostile?", have a place in the novel. Undoubtedly, the book is rich in lofty philosophical inquiry, perhaps not entirely pertinent to the average man, but Melville's confidence theme touches all. Most people, when they are depressed, confused, or just curious, ponder the workings of the Universe. They pose what can be called the "everlasting why": why do men cheat others?, why is life unpredictable?, why is nature destructive? Why? Few questions are answered;

hence, men must decide how to place faith (confidence) in an unfathomable world. In Moby-Dick it is Ishmael who asks the "everlasting why" and it is he who articulates Melville's most optimistic sentiments on how men can establish confidence in the Universe.

Although Ishmael is not an innocent like Redburn, the encounter-reconciliation pattern introduced in the Redburn chapter also gives a framework for his development and final stance. Ishmael encounters life and learns to reconcile its apparent opposites such as good and evil, joy and sorrow. His education is heightened by the other major characters of the novel, Ahab, Queequeg, and Starbuck, who act as foils for him. With their philosophies, these men assist Ishmael in establishing the confidence attitude most comfortable for him. They also provide Melville with an opportunity to present various confidence perspectives; hence, a consideration of these men adds much to any study of Melville's confidence theme.

Redburn suggests that despite men's evil one should have confidence in them because rejection leads to painful solitude. In Moby-Dick, Melville develops this idea further through the interaction of Queequeg, Ahab, and Ishmael. Ishmael learns from Queequeg that a straightforward confidence in men is essential in the complex Universe; simply, men cannot exist totally independently because the exigencies of daily existence are sometimes too difficult for one man

to handle. Men need other men; hence, they should tolerate them. Ahab, the incensed captain who rejects love in his pursuit of Moby-Dick, exemplifies the folly of self-imposed isolation. By observing Ahab's reckless attempt to fathom the evil he believes to pervade the world, Ishmael is able to see more clearly that Queequeg's brotherhood, not Ahab's extremism, is the best course to follow.

The opening pages of Moby-Dick indicate that Ishmael is a character better prepared than Redburn to undergo change. While Redburn is a relatively innocent young man who goes to sea in order to earn a living, Ishmael is an individual who sees his ocean voyage as a refresher for his flagging soul. He mentions that a trip to sea "is a way I have of driving off the spleen, and regulating the circulation."[1] The confidence theme is quickly introduced when Ishmael, apparently learning from previous experiences, states,

> whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street and methodically knocking people's hats off--then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. (I, p. 1)

[1]Herman Melville, Moby-Dick (New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1963), Chapter I, p. 1. All other quotations will be noted textually by chapter and page number.

At this time in his life Ishmael finds his confidence waning. He must restrain himself from "methodically knocking people's hats off"; as a result, he chooses to go sailing in order to erase his distemper. This early account of Ishmael's spiritual condition establishes a point which becomes clearer as the novel progresses: the young voyager is a receptive, thoughtful individual who wishes to use his experiences to refresh his outlook on mankind. Like his Biblical counterpart, he is destined to travel in the wilderness, in this case the vast ocean, in order to gain spiritual knowledge.

Of all the men and events in Ishmael's voyage, Queequeg plays the most important role in his enlightenment. Shortly after meeting the strangely-tatooed primitive, Ishmael experiences a lessening of his distemper. The young voyager mentions, "I began to be sensible of strange feelings. I felt a melting in men. No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world" (X, p. 62). Already, Ishmael senses a return of his lost confidence. Unlike Redburn, who becomes disgusted and eventually isolated by the "wolfish world", Ishmael loses his distaste for it. Noticing this rebirth, H.C. Brasher contents that

> the introspective and meditative Ishmael, with the help of Queequeg's instinct, eventually gains the balance, both a conscious and an instinctual kinship with and belongingness to the inner and outer mysteries of

> life. By the end of the book, the mystic-religious lesson in Queequeg's tatoos, a 'complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth,' [Chapt. 110] has been psychically transferred to Ishmael's personality.[2]

In the same psychological vein, John Halverson, offering a Jungian interpretation of Moby-Dick, sees Queequeg as Ishmael's "helpful shadow" who cures him of the "damp, drizzly November"[3] in his soul. Queequeg, then, is the Harry Bolton of Moby-Dick. Like his counterpart in Redburn, Queequeg helps Ishmael re-establish his acceptance of men.

The parallel between Harry Bolton and Queequeg goes little further than their roles as men who save an individual from isolation. Queequeg is much more than the scallywag whom Redburn befriends in desperation. With surprising ease, he is able to act according to his brotherly sentiments. At all times he bases his endeavours on the maxim: "It's a mutual, joint-stock world, in all meridians. We cannibals must help these Christians" (XIV, p. 76). This philosophy, which Ishmael learns is extremely wise, is carried out repeatedly by Queequeg. He tolerates all men. Always his first act is to help those in need or to demonstrate straightforward friendliness. He politely accepts

[2]Brashers, "Ishmael's Tattos," SR, LXX (Winter 1962), p. 137.

[3]John Halverson, "The Shadow in Moby-Dick," AQ, XV (Fall 1963), p. 438.

Ishmael at the Spouter Inn; he saves a country bumpkin from drowning after he falls from the Nantucket Ferry; and, he saves Tashtego from suffocating in a sperm whale's head. From these occurrences it becomes clear that Queequeg is a creature of instinctive action. It is Ishmael who is able to make the primitive's manners applicable to his own life.

Queequeg's metaphor that "It's a mutual, joint-stock world" adds an important perspective to Melville's confidence theme: ideal love or confidence may not be possible in an ambiguous and treacherous world but men must display some trust in each other because life is shared, as a business is divided into stocks. Here, Melville suggests a "united we stand" approach to the social world. Men may crave independence or dislike relating to others, but they must make some commitment to them if they are to survive life's trials.

In a key chapter in Moby-Dick ("The Monkey-Rope", LXXII), Ishmael discovers the necessity for brotherhood despite the desire for independence. While Queequeg is suspended over the side of the Pequod cutting into a freshly-caught sperm whale, he is attached to Ishmael by a monkey-rope. In this precarious instant Ishmael realizes that

> an elongated Siamese ligature united us. Queequeg was my own inseparable twin brother; nor could I any way get rid of the dangerous liabilities which the hempen bond entailed. (CXII, p. 48)

Ishmael learns an extremely practical lesson from this. Not only are men dependent on other men to the point that they

cannot survive alone, but they are also required to help their fellows. Ishmael recalls:

> So strongly and metaphysically did I conceive my situation then, that while earnestly watching his motions, I seemed distinctly to perceive that my own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two:
>
> . . . handle Queequeg's monkey-rope heedfully as I would, sometimes he jerked it so, that I came very near sliding overboard. Nor could I possibly forget that, do what I would, I only had management of one end of it. (LXXII, p. 48).

Ishmael's language reflects that he understands Queequeg's secular metaphor about brotherhood. He uses a business image, "merged in a joint stock company of two", and he mentions a banker and an apothecary. Further, Ishmael realizes that Providence demands that men co-exist in the everyday world no matter what the consequences. This situation can prove to be dangerous since one is always placing his life in someone else's hands. However, a total escape into solitude is undesirable. Men need each other. Even though universal felicity is ideal and not easily applied in this world, some sort of inter-reliance is needed. Often a compromise is necessary. Redburn is forced to befriend Harry Bolton to appease his suffering. In Moby-Dick, as we shall see, Ahab, who refuses to break down his barrier, becomes insanely alone. With these continuing examples, Melville suggests that because man is mortal and unable to withstand all horrors, he must trust

others even if it means a surrendering of absolute self-reliance.

Ahab adds emphasis through contrast to Moby-Dick's confidence motif. On one hand he isolates himself from all men in his pursuit of the White Whale, and on the other hand he rejects all possibility of joy and good in the Universe. This latter pessimistic attitude introduces an aspect of the confidence theme not highly developed in Redburn. In contrast to Queequeg, Ahab is a man of non-confidence who can see only gloom in the Universe. He cannot adjust to the fact that life is a continuous stream of opposites--good and evil, joy and sorrow, love and hate, for example. By focusing on Ahab, then, it is possible to establish broader perspectives on the confidence thread of Moby-Dick.

While Queequeg sees life's essential purpose as helping others, Ahab sees nothing but the Whale. He is so bent on seeking revenge on Moby-Dick and fathoming the Whale's mystery that he leaves his family behind, disregards the safety of his crew, and drives himself mad. In Ahab's eyes, the Whale represents all that teases, confuses, and harms men. He senses that there is a malicious, calculating force behind the White Whale; in other words, he postulates that there is more to the Universe than seen reality. Furthermore, he is angered because he thinks that whatever is underlying the surface has struck out at him. Accordingly, he gives

Starbuck these reasons for his pursuit of Moby-Dick:

> Hark ye yet again,--the little lower layer. All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event--in the living act, the undoubted deed--there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the White Whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the White Whale agent, or be the White Whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. (XXXVI, p. 204)

Though Ahab is not sure, he guesses that behind Nature's "unreasoning mask" there is a "reasoning thing" which makes life miserable for men. In his case, the wall or mask which the unknown powers use to hide their malicious intent is the White Whale, an apparently dumb, but destructive creature. Here Melville adds a cosmic scope to the confidence theme. Perhaps, as Ahab wonders, God or whoever controls the Universe, is an omnipresent trickster who uses elaborate disguises to hide his evil purpose. For instance, the Whale could be a clever cover-up for the harm God wishes to do to mankind. Many men accept horrors like Moby-Dick as being an unavoidable fact of life, but Ahab is maddened by the possibility that an insidious trick is being played on him; as a result, he tries to penetrate what he believes to be Nature's mask. He yearns with all his fury

to hunt and attack the White Whale, the natural creature which makes him aware of Nature's illusion. In fact, Ahab is so incensed by the "inscrutable thing" which makes the universe precarious that it does not matter to him if the Whale is not a front for a "reasoning thing"--(as he puts it, if there is "naught beyond"). He wishes to strike anyway. He may not know the object of his hatred but he craves to gain revenge somehow. Hence, he chooses the Whale whether it is the "principal"--the actual source of malice--or whether it is the "agent"--the means by which the "reasoning thing" exerts its evil on mankind.

Ishmael summarizes Ahab's sentiment that the Universe, as men perceive it, may be a sugar-coating over an inner horror by startlingly suggesting that all the physical beauties of the world

> are but subtile deceits, not actually inherent in substances, only laid on from without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within . . . (XLII, p. 244)

Here, Melville implies most pointedly that the Universe contains elaborately disguised evil. And, because he has been ravaged by the deceiving natural powers, Ahab holds an intense yearning to strip away the outer "allurements" which make many believe that the world is essentially beautiful. The injury that Moby-Dick has given him convinces him that evil, not good and beauty, is at the centre of Nature and he wishes to be certain of this fact. He lacks

confidence in the appearances of the external world; therefore, he undertakes a symbolic journey into the unknown in his pursuit of the Whale. And, as is indicated by his refusal to break off his quest despite its impracticality, his fervour is so great that it approaches madness. He becomes so single-minded in his analytical search for meaning that he denies all else, especially his own humanity. Nothing, not even his own mortality, prevents Ahab from trying to get at the core of existence. As a man searching for truth, alone, actually denying the guidance of others, he becomes an isolated quester--a man whose energy hypnotizes everyone but who eventually is looked upon as a foolish madman.

Melville supplies a twist to the confidence motif by making Ahab into somewhat of a confidence-man. In order to complete his assault on the Whale, Ahab must persuade the _Pequod's_ crew to assist him. Ironically, Ahab rejects love in his monomania but his endeavour demands that he rely on others. However, he overlooks this valuable lesson about confidence. While Ishmael sees dependency as an unavoidable consequence of living in a precarious world, Ahab refuses to accept such a philosophy; instead, he chooses to manipulate his crew, almost as if they were machines, in order to suit his purposes. In carrying out his plans he becomes as cunning as any trickster Melville creates in _The Confidence-Man_.

Ahab is able to understand that the crew, like much of common humanity, is not interested in seeking truth. So, while he is initially able to appeal to the crew's hunting instinct, he is moved to introduce still more concrete rewards. As the captain estimates,

> They may scorn cash now; but let some months go by, and no prospective promise of it to them, and then this same quiescent cash all at once mutinying in them, this same cash would soon cashier Ahab. (XLVI, p. 267)

Here, Melville strikes at the heart of a major aspect of _The Confidence-Man_. The promise of cash can make many act foolishly; hence, the confidence artist uses it to prepare his victims for his deceptions. In _Moby-Dick_ Ahab does the same thing by luring the crew with the prize of the doubloon which he nails to the mast. Like Riga in _Redburn_, Ahab indicates just why confidence in men is difficult. One never knows whether or not a man he is dealing with has honest intentions.

Starbuck and Ishmael do not interpret Ahab's demands as a cruel confidence game; nevertheless, unlike the rest of the crew, they are reluctant to follow their vengeful captain's plan. Starbuck rebels against Ahab's attack on the Whale because he believes it to be blasphemous. When he learns of Ahab's scheme to pursue Moby-Dick, he cries

> Vengeance on a dumb brute!. . . that simply smote thee from blindest instinct! Madness! To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous. (XXXVI, p. 204)

Here, Starbuck contends that Moby-Dick is a dumb, instinctive animal and nothing more. He believes that the Whale has no conscious purpose or moral sense; therefore, seeking revenge on it is cruel and senseless, a defiance of the God who created such an unthinking creature. Hatred of Nature is hatred of God in Starbuck's eyes; hence, Ahab is a sinner. With this stance Starbuck stands directly opposed to Ahab. The enraged captain believes that God is like a confidence-man who continually deludes mankind, whereas Starbuck has faith that He works toward the best interests of man. The _Pequod's_ first-mate maintains his trust in the Lord's benevolance despite evidence which suggests that He is far from kind to men. Starbuck dislikes viewing evil so much that he hangs on to a confidence (faith) that beneath life's ugliness there is an essential beauty. While gazing over the side of the ship on a calm day Starbuck comments, "Loveliness unfathomable, as ever lover saw in his young bride's eye!--Tell me not of thy teeth-tiered sharks, and thy kidnapping cannibal ways. Let faith oust fact; let fancy oust memory; I look deep down and do believe" (CXIV, p. 265). This statement reveals that Starbuck refuses to accept the realities of the world around him. "Unlike Ahab, for whom the 'horrible fact' of nature ousts 'faith', and unlike Ishmael, for whom 'fact and fancy' meet at some point of balance, Starbuck tries to believe in the good so strongly

that the objective fact of evil will become insignificant."[4] Starbuck seems to yearn for a solid basis of belief, in this case standard Christian faith, which makes him ineffectual in the ever-shifting ambiguous world. Essentially, Starbuck is a victim of his own religious convictions. Rather than giving him the freedom to pursue spiritual understanding while he is becoming aware of the world around him, his form of Christianity makes him completely effete and defenceless against men like Ahab.

Starbuck and Ahab represent opposite extremes in their confidence toward God but Ishmael, as Feidelson points out, takes a middle stance of fluctuating confidence in which "'fact and fancy' meet at some point of balance". Ishmael can dream of ideal love (for example, "A Squeeze of the Hand", XCIV, p. 172) but he cannot overlook the horrors he witnesses during the whaling adventure. Because of his balanced stance, Ishmael cannot follow Ahab who, in his extreme non-confidence, rejects all faith in men and Nature; in addition, he cannot agree with Starbuck who refuses to deal with the fact that evil does exist.

Strangely, while we are never aware that Ahab and Ishmael meet, we are struck by how effectively Ishmael uses his captain's error as a guide for his own life. At all

[4]Charles Feidelson, Jr., ed., Moby-Dick by Herman Melville (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1964), p. 624.

times Ishmael sees what bothers Ahab but, except for a heated instant on the quarter-deck, he remains untouched by Ahab's anger. This is not difficult for him because, unlike Ahab, he takes the Universe's apparent malice in his stride. Ahab is forever shaking his fist at the unknown powers, whereas Ishmael often shrugs his shoulders in bewilderment. For example, he makes this comment after Starbuck's boat is almost lost during the first lowering:

> There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody's expense but his own. (XLIX, p. 286)

In the same breath he suggests:

> There is nothing like the perils of whaling to breed this free and easy sort of genial, desperado philosophy; and with it I now regarded this whole voyage of the Pequod, and the great White Whale its object. (XLIX, p. 286)

Ishmael knows that Ahab is perplexed by the Universe's ambiguity ("The Whiteness of the Whale", XLII) but the young adventurer with his "desperado philosophy", is not incensed by Nature's mystery. If God is a confidence-man, Ishmael is prepared to be duped by a few of his tricks. As a result, he is not drawn away from the balanced life as is Ahab in his pursuit of the Universe's distant powers. Instead, he tries to get on with life by attempting to develop a vision

which reconciles all the world's apparent opposites, spirit and matter, joy and woe, good and evil.

The *Pequod's* voyage, throughout the novel, is filled with incidents which reveal that the Universe is a mixture of opposites. Ishmael notes that while the primitive natural world is full of vulturism and destruction, at times it is also calm and appealing. Sharks, the wolves of the sea, attack captured whales with a ferocity which prompts Ishmael to exclaim, "If you have never seen that sight, then suspend your decision about the propriety of devil worship, and the expediency of conciliating the devil" (LXIV, p. 14). The physical elements also have a frightening side as in "the First Lowering" when Starbuck's boat is almost lost. However, nature is often quite benign and dream-inducing as in scenes like the "Mast-Head" and "Squeezing of the Hands". Mysteriously, the sea can change from rolling to raging, from dream to nightmare, and back again. Clearly, the natural realm is an unpredictable mixture of chaos and calm. In addition, man in his social environment demonstrates the same rhythmical contrast. Sometimes, men are sharks. Men claw away at each other in their greed. But, at the same time, there are those considerate of others. If Fleece can describe Stubb as more of a shark than the sharks themselves (LXIV), Ishmael can discover toleration and honesty in the companionship of Queequeg. *Moby-Dick's* contrasts prompt H.C. Brashers to

say that "one of the structural elements in the book is the great rhythmical alteration of Appollonian calm and Dionysian chaos . . ."[5] And, Ishmael, the book's eventual well-adjusted man, utilizes his experiences to give him an awareness and acceptance of this eternal cadence.

After witnessing many varied scenes aboard the _Pequod_, Ishmael is left with a choice between optimism and pessimism toward life--or, like Redburn--between confidence and scepticism. As has been noted, Ishmael is better able than Redburn to make his choice because he is capable of making the best use of his experiences. It is in "The Try-Works" chapter (XCVI), that Ishmael makes the maximum of his insight in order to reconcile life's opposites. While at the _Pequod's_ tiller during a night-time shift, Ishmael observes a hell-like scene of the crew removing oil from the blubber of a recently caught whale. This eeriness excites Ishmael's vivid imagination and he exclaims, "the rushing _Pequod_, freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and a burning corpse, and plunging into that blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's soul" (XCVI, p. 180). For a moment, an image of Ahab's torment and terrible rage are flashed before Ishmael's eyes in terrifying intensity. Never before on the journey has Ahab's madness been more apparent and frightening to Ishmael.

[5] Brashers, p. 141.

Falling into a drowsiness (not unfamiliar to him, as shown in earlier scenes), Ishmael forgets his duty to steer the ship. Suddenly, he finds himself facing the horrific fire raging in the try-works instead of the bow of the ship. Fortunately, he is able to reorient himself before the ship capsizes. And, as usual, Ishmael is able to perceive "the felt analogy between the natural event and the soul of man."[6] This nearly fatal blunder teaches him a lesson about the dangers of becoming fixed on a negative view of life. Shaken to the point of profound insight, Ishmael advocates:

> Look not too long in the face of the fire, O man! Never dream with thy hand on the helm! Turn not thy back to the compass: accept the first hint of the hitching tiller; believe not the artificial fire, when its redness makes all things look ghastly. To-morrow, in the natural sun, the skies will be bright; those who glared like devils in the forking flames, the morn will show in far other, at least gentler, relief; the glorious, golden, glad sun, the only true lamp--all others but liars! (XCVI, p. 181)

Here, Ishmael warns men not to be too preoccupied with the "artificial fire", man-made evil. He admits that at times man's corruption does make "all things look ghastly"; but, in spite of this, good, beauty--all life's positive forces--do exist. And, like the "sun", they will always rise up to lessen evil's ugliness. With this statement, Ishmael reveals that he thinks quite differently from Ahab.

[6] R.W.B. Lewis, The American Adam, p. 131.

The enraged captain is obsessed with "the artificial fire" and, in his efforts to discover its source, he acts like a man who forgets his duty at the tiller. Instead of keeping an eye on the necessary aspects of living, he "thinks" himself into utter intellectual solitude. In contrast, Ishmael, especially after the horrible experience at the tiller, refuses to lose touch with secular life. Queequeg has shown him the need for brotherhood and, now, Ishmael is even firmer in his desire to place faith in earthly life.

Ishmael continues in his interpretation of "the Try-Works" incident to make a statement which lifts him above Starbuck and Ahab in their attitudes toward the Universe. Showing a wisdom quite different from that of his dreamy moments, Ishmael confesses:

> The sun hides not the ocean, which is the dark side of this earth, and which is two thirds of this earth. So, therefore, that mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, that mortal man cannot be true --not true, or undeveloped. (XCVI, p. 181)

Yes, cries Ishmael, there is evil in the Universe and the man who refuses to accept that fact is "not true", like Starbuck, who lies to himself about the ugliness he sees around him. Or he is "undeveloped", like the innocent Redburn who, because of his inexperience, has not yet seen life's sorrow. However, despite the necessity to accept evil, one cannot forget good. Even Solomon, The Man of Sorrows, was able to see that blackness was not the only

side to the Universe. In fact, according to Solomon, the man who believes that the Universe is completely evil "'shall remain' (i.e., even while living) 'in the congregation of the dead'" (XCVI, p. 182). Ahab is Solomon's man of the dead. By chasing the Whale until he has nothing wordly to grasp, Ahab exists in a spiritual death-in-life which prompts Ishmael to say:

> Give not thyself up, then, to fire, lest it invert thee, deaden thee; as for the time it did me. There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness. And there is a Catskill eagle in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces. And even if he for ever flies within the gorge, that gorge is in the mountains; so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar. (XCVI, p. 182)

With this natural image Ishmael phrases his confidence that despite all the world's evil, woe, and suffering, there is hope. Because he generates this optimism, his soul, like a "Catskill eagle", will always be able to rise above the world's sadness. Ishmael admits that "There is a wisdom that is woe", that a knowledge of evil is needed for a realistic view of existence. But, in addition, "there is a woe that is madness", a preoccupation with corrupation, destruction, and malice which drives a man insane. Clearly, Ahab is the man of constant pessimism; his downfall undeniably demonstrates that too much concern over blackness is ultimately self-destructive.

Ishmael's outlook amounts to maintaining even in the face of tragedy an optimistic attitude that joy will arise even if sorrow does exist. As R.W.B. Lewis suggests, without this resilient philosophy

> There occur (as Ishmael sees it) two dangerous alternative conditions. On the one hand: an empty innocence, a tenacious ignorance of evil, which, granted the tough nature of reality, must be either immaturity or spiritual cowardice. On the other hand: a sense of evil so inflexible, so adamant in its refusal to admit the not less reducible fact of existent good that it is perilously close to a love of evil, a queer pact with the devil. Each alternative is a path toward destruction; the second is the very embrace of the destroying power.[7]

Undoubtedly, Ishmael gleans from his experience some of Solomon's Ecclesiastical wisdom about the Universe's eternal rhythm of positive and negative forces. During his stay on the Pequod he sees all sides of the Universe--joy and sorrow, love and hate, chaos and calm--and he is able to reconcile them because of his encounters. Like Redburn, Ishmael's ability to withstand many irritations enables him to stand pat and receive insight when others would run. He need not escape reality (like Starbuck) or reject secular life (like Ahab) in order to express the nature of his confidence in the Universe. Instead, he emerges as a man who knows evil but who refuses to be overwhelmed by it. In addition, he not only lives in the harsh world but also uses its events to fortify his faith in the "natural sun". For just as the sun naturally rises, so too will storm eventually

[7]Lewis, p. 132.

be replaced by calm, evil by good. Most importantly, Ishmael is prepared to withstand the opposite shift from positive to negative, from calm to chaos, because he has learned to tolerate the Universe's enigmatic rhythm.

Ishmael, then, is a profound extension of Melville's trial hero, Redburn. After seeing deception and social injustice during his journey, Redburn reluctantly places confidence in Harry Bolton. Even this overture of friendship is blunted by Redburn's actions in New York. In contrast, Ishmael develops a warm trust in Queequeg, one which will also be directed toward other men. In addition, Ishmael goes much further in developing confidence toward the Universe which often mystifies both him and Redburn. Redburn's reconciliation with the world appears only partial whereas Ishmael's is well developed--in fact, optimal --for a comfortable existence. Undoubtedly, Ishmael is the man of the "golden mean". Not only does he learn to tolerate life's fluctuations but he also discovers the necessity of brotherhood in the ever-mysterious world. Characters like Ahab and Starbuck, with their confidence attitudes, appear trapped, but Ishmael develops an ability to freely face and judge life's often confusing incidents. Clearly, in the cast of magnificently presented figures in Moby-Dick, Ishmael develops the most viable confidence stance.

CHAPTER III

PIERRE

In Moby-Dick Ahab expresses his suspicion that a "reasoning thing" hides behind the White Whale. The captain wonders whether God (or some ruling power) is like a clever confidence-man who uses a dumb, natural creature to carry out His insidious intentions. Ishmael, the enlightened man of the novel, also senses that the gods are playing a "vast practical joke" on men. Now, in Melville's tale of a young innocent, Pierre, the "joke" becomes even more apparent. When Pierre learns that his father has hidden the existence of a bastard daughter from him and his mother, he vows to seek Truth--that is, an ideal, all-explaining plane beyond the deceptive layers of this world. Unfortunately, rather than gaining any enlight e n ment Pierre becomes confused and desperate. All is ambiguity. In addition, the higher powers in which he places confidence abandon him. They remain distant and silent like someone who has started a practical joke and who stands back to laugh secretly at his victim.

This paper approaches Pierre's confidence theme in two ways: Firstly, Pierre is considered as an innocent man who becomes God's victim because he places confidence

in Him. Secondly, consideration is given to how Pierre might have acted in order to escape the trap of seeking ideals.

The basis for Melville's philosophical thought is a melodrama seemingly best suited for the Saturday matinee. The story opens at a pleasant, rolling green country estate, Saddle Meadows, where Pierre resides with his affectionate mother. Everything is ideal, including the honour and respect which Pierre displays toward the memory of his deceased father, one of a long line of upstanding figures populating the Glendinning past. The bright rural scene is completed by an angelic girl, Lucy, whom Pierre loves.

Soon, however, Pierre's idyllic life is completely upset. He is haunted by the image of a dark, beautiful and melancholic female face which he unsuccessfully attempts to blot out. Pierre's agitation over the face is heightened when, at a local sewing gathering, he accidently spies a young girl with surprisingly similar features. Coincidence, from this point on, begins to play a major role in Pierre's history.

Shortly after the incident at the sewing bee, the young innocent is confronted by a stranger who hands him a letter and then departs without any explanation. The letter turns out to be a brief note from a girl who claims she is his illegitimate half-sister. The youth, who up

until this moment has never been touched by evil, is stunned by this information; suddenly, the ignorant but happy life of his boyhood is gone with the crashing blow that his honourable father is the sire of a bastard girl.

Faced with the first test of his life, Pierre decides to act quickly. He establishes himself as a soldier in search of ideal Virtue and Truth, convinced that he alone can alleviate the potential suffering which the shattering letter contains. Accordingly, he goes to meet the writer of the letter, Isabel, and he discovers that she has the baffling face that has been haunting him. At once, he is attracted to her strange, sad beauty and after a short, but intense tete-a-tete, Pierre is sure that the girl is truly his half-sister.

The now highly-agitated young man attempts to hide the truth about Isabel. Not wanting to destroy his proud mother and ruin his father's name, Pierre feigns marriage to Isabel and flees to New York City. There, the country-bred innocent is faced with the cruel hardships of city live. He and his charges, Isabel and a pregnant girl, Nelly, are confronted with the massive task of surviving in a cold, unfriendly environment. Pierre attempts to write a book which will reveal Truth in its purest form; unfortunately, this task does little to fulfill the worldy requirements of the threesome. The most outrageous of a series of indignations is Pierre's rejection by his once-beloved cousin, Glen

Stanley. This fellow eventually inherits Saddle Meadows from Pierre's mother who disowns her son and then dies.

Meanwhile, Lucy, displaying more mettle than might have been expected of her, arrives in the city with a plea to help her distraught lover. Pierre, Isabel, and Lucy exist under strained conditions for a short time until the tension explodes when cousin Glen and Lucy's brother come to rescue her from what they believe to be Pierre's demoniac grip. After a minor scuffle, Pierre eventually follows the two into the streets of New York, where he kills his cousin. Subsequently jailed, Pierre is joined by his comforters, Isabel and Lucy, when these dark and the blonde heroines come to assist their hero. Isabel, a strange and unfathomable creature to the end, shares poison with Pierre but allows their secret to escape her lips before succumbing. Upon hearing of Isabel's relationship to Pierre, Lucy expires, apparently from a broken heart. The scene closes with the three tormented individuals lying dead in the damp, dreary confines of a New York City jail. At this point, the brightness of the opening pages of _Pierre_ is long forgotten.

Because his perceptions have not been altered by experience, Pierre creates for himself a world in which ideals like Truth and Beauty can be attained and in which he can act with knight-like virtue. Here, Pierre creates a lofty view of the world not unlike Redburn's youthful dreams of sea-life. And as both men eventually discover, both

visions are well off the mark.

By shaping the world to fit his own naive estimation of it, Pierre typifies the statement that:

> Say what some poets will, Nature is not so much her own ever-sweet interpreter, as the mere supplier of the cunning alphabet, whereby selecting and combining as he pleases, each man reads his own peculiar lesson according to his own peculiar mind and mood.[1]

This passage suggests that it is not so much the gods but men themselves who create much of their own difficulty. Nature (or God) supplies the "cunning alphabet" and each man reads his own "peculiar lesson" into it. In other words, man is given a subtle, possibly-misleading code and he must make of it what he can. One is reminded of the cryptic spiel a confidence-man gives a customer in order to prepare him for a clever trick.

Ahab's situation emphasizes just how "cunning" Nature's alphabet can be. The Whale may or may not be an extension of the gods, but its seemingly hostile activity is enough to tantalize Ahab. Thus, like a man trying to find a pea in a bizarre shell game, he is urged to find some significance where there may be none at all.

Undoubtedly, man's tendency to interpret Nature subjectively ("according to his own peculiar mind and mood") could lead to folly, even madness. Ahab and Pierre show

[1]Herman Melville, Pierre, Std. Ed. Vol. IX (New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1963), p. 56. All other quotes will be noted textually.

this. Early in the novel, Pierre displays a dangerous idealism when he appeals to the justice of the gods to reveal what lies at the bottom of the mystery of the phantom face:

> If aught really lurks in it, ye sovereign powers that claim all my real worshippings, I conjure ye to lift the veil; I must see it face to face. Tread I on a mine, warn me; advance I on a precipice, hold me back; but abandon me to an unknown misery, that it shall suddenly seize me, and possess me, wholly--that ye will never do; else, Pierre's fond faith in ye--now clean, untouched--may clean depart; and give me up to be a railing atheist. (p. 56)

Pierre expects Nature to act as her own "eversweet interpreter"; that is, he thinks that the mystery of the phantom face should be explained to him by the gods. With this stance he places utter confidence in the possibility the "sovereign powers" actually do exist and that they will help him. This display of idealistic faith is worsened by Pierre's show of bravado. He claims that he has a "fond faith" or a complete trust in the gods that is "clean, untouched"--but deserted by them he will, in essence, change his attitude from white to black, from total acceptance to complete rejection. Anyone who has faced life's ambiguity before could tell Pierre that such an ultimatum is suicide. For few answers are ever given, and if they are, they are usually adroitly disguised.

It is not long before Pierre's faith in the gods is tested. Still perplexed by the baffling vision, Pierre

meets a stranger who gives him the letter which is destined to plunge him into a chain reaction of painful experiences. Rather than discarding the note, the young man submits to the "irrestible admonitions and intuitions of Fate" (p. 85) and in doing so he is subjected to a bitter education about the appearances that often cloak reality. The missive from Isabel suddenly destroys the pure and exalted image of his father that Pierre has fostered. This shattering of a long-held illusion is a tremendous blow to an individual who has never known that deception is part of his life. Without warning, the knowledge that all is not what it appears to be is added to the burden of sadness created by the melancholic face. Suddenly Pierre is abandoned by the gods to an "unknown misery."

Despite the intrusion of an apparent Truth into his life, Pierre remains dangerously innocent. Instead of realizing that the glimpse of Truth he has received is the most anyone can expect, he decides to uncover all illusion. He takes a totally ideal stand with the exclamation:

> Henceforth I will know nothing but Truth; glad Truth, or sad Truth; I will know what _is_, and do what my deepest angel dictates. (p. 90)

Here Pierre initiates a defiant spiritual quest, one based on the confidence that ideals like Truth are humanly attainable. Still blindly innocent, he believes that absolute Truth, like justice from the gods, is something that

can be found. As his "fond faith" in the gods indicates, Pierre clings to the tenet that above all the illusions and unfathomableness of earthly life there is a pure level of unswerving ideals that human beings can use to guide themselves. Unwilling to bend from this position, Melville's protagonist continues to seek out this distant goal for the rest of his dismal history.

Essentially, Pierre victimizes himself by believing he can find ultimates when others cannot. Ironically, he takes his Truth-seeking stand because he thinks that he has already been a victim of Fate's confidence game. Incensed, he cries

> . . . Fate, I have a choice quarrel with thee.
>
> Thou art a palterer and a cheat; thou hast lured me on through gay gardens to a gulf.
>
> Now I feel that nothing but Truth can move me so. (pp. 90-91)

A later novel, The Confidence-Man, is filled with "palterers and cheats" who have little difficulty in handling their victims, especially innocents like Pierre. In this case, Pierre feels that he has been cheated because Fate has concealed evil from him. He believes that he can escape any further deception by finding Truth; however, little does he realize that by undertaking his ideal task he is being drawn further into an ambiguous, treacherous maze rather than freeing himself from it. For if Truth is ever to be known, God must speak it. But, as the narrator states, "Silence

is the only voice of our God" (p. 28). In his naivete, Pierre cannot understand this statement. He has never had enough experience to discover that searches for Truth are futile in the secular world. Instead, Pierre, interpreting the "cunning alphabet" with staunch idealism, sacrifices love and comfort in order to undertake his quest.

Later in the novel, during the time that he is barely existing as a writer in New York, Pierre is compared to those philosophers who attempt to find the Talismanic secret that will enable them to reconcile their souls with the Universe. The contention is made that the quest to find answers explaining life is absurd since

> [t]hat profound Silence, that only Voice of God, which I before spake of; from that divine thing without a name, those imposter philosophers pretend somehow to have got an answer; which is absurd, as though they should say they had got water out of a stone; for how can a man get a Voice out of Silence? (p. 290)

This statement suggests that Pierre has undertaken a Sisyphean task. There are no answers, although men like Pierre and Ahab are urged, often to the point of insanity, to seek them.

Plotinus Plinlimmon is the God of Silence in Pierre. In analysing the Transcendental philosophers' parallel with God, Merlin Bowen writes that as an example of the "withdrawn and self-absorbed deity, we are given a dramatic prefiguration in the person of the philosopher Plotinus Plinlimmon

whose distant face looked down into Pierre's cubicle from a high window in the Apostle's tower."[2] Fittingly, Plinlimmon is a completely ambiguous individual:

> . . . while the personal look and air of this man were . . . winning, there was still something latently visible in him which repelled. That something may be best characterized as non-Benevolence. Non-Benevolence seems the best word, for it was neither Malice nor Ill-Will; but something passive. To crown all, a certain floating atmosphere seemed to invest and go along with this man. The atmosphere seemed only renderable in words by the term Inscrutableness. (p. 404)

Plinlimmon is presented as a prototype for the elusive and multi-disguised tricksters of The Confidence-Man:

> Though the clothes worn by this man were strictly in accordance with the general style of any unobtrusive gentleman's dress, yet his clothes seemed to disguise this man. (p. 404)

Here Plinlimmon is described as a man who attempts to conceal his indifferent attitude toward men. He is, as Bowen points out, like a "self-absorbed deity" who tries to conceal his disregard for men by presenting an enigmatic appearance. Plinlimmon's spiritual distance parallels his physical distance as Pierre observes him from his chamber window:

> Very early after taking chambers at the Apostles', he had been struck by a steady observant blue-eyed countenance at one of

[2] Bowen, The Long Encounter, p. 112.

> the loftiest windows of the old gray tower, which on the opposite side of the quadrangular space, rose prominently before his own chamber. Only through two panes of glass--his own and the stranger's--had Pierre hitherto beheld that remarkable face of repose,--repose neither divine nor human, nor anything made up of either or both--but a repose separate and apart--a repose of a face by itself. One adequate look at that face conveyed to most philosophical observers a notion of something not before included in their scheme of the Universe. (p. 406)

Plinlimmon's face suggests a universe in which God exists but one in which he cares nothing about the fortunes of man. By taking this frighteningly powerful stance He has the ability to remain uninvolved while controlling human life. The philosopher's adeptness at mastering types like Charlie Millthorpe, Pierre's good-natured friend, serves as an example of his God-like strength and indifference:

> . . . though in all human probability Plotinus well understood Millthorpe, yet Millthorpe could hardly yet have wound himself into Plotinus;--though indeed Plotinus--who at times was capable of assuming a very off-hand, confidential, and simple, sophomorean air--might, for reasons best known to himself, have tacitly pretended to Millthorpe, that he (Millthorpe) had thoroughly wriggled himself into his (Plotinus') innermost soul. (p. 407)

In this respect, Plinlimmon is similar to the confidence man, who gains the trust of his victims and then uses it to his own advantage. And, like the God of Silence, he is a being who receives adoration but who never returns any gratitude or assistance; instead, he remains enigmatically silent and non-caring.

In Moby-Dick, Ahab becomes incensed by God's silence; Starbuck remains faithful to God in spite of it; and, Ishmael accepts it as an unavoidable consequence of existence. Pierre, far more innocent than these characters, does not recognize God's silence until he has worn himself out searching for Truth. It seems that if God is playing a joke on men who trust Him, His lack of response extends it.

In spite of their distance, both God and the Transcendental philosopher have immense control over mankind. For example, Plinlimmon's face master's Pierre: "By and by the blue-eyed, mystic-mild face in the upper window of the old gray tower began to domineer in a very remarkable manner upon Pierre" (p. 408). It even tantalizes him with a cry to end his absurd actions:

> Vain! vain! vain! said the face to him.
> Fool! fool! fool! said the face to him.
> Quit! quit! quit! said the face to him.
> But when he mentally interrogated the face as to why it thrice said Vain! Fool! Quit! to him; here there was no response. For that face did not respond to anything. Did I not say before that the face was something separate and apart; (p. 408)

Here the face taunts Pierre by giving a warning and then refusing to explain it further. Once it has tantalized its victim, the face remains silent and unreachable like the God who does not show men the Talismanic secret of the universe.

Perhaps, then, as desperate as they are for certainty, men provide it with their own subjectivity. The narrator

suggests that Pierre might be subjectifying in the Plinlimmon situation when he notes, "somehow to Pierre the face at last wore a sort of malicious leer to him. But the Kantists might say, that this was a <u>subjective</u> sort of leer in Pierre" (p. 409). Pierre, like Ahab, may be reading into the world around him, giving it greater importance than it actually has. In this case, Plinlimmon may be totally indifferent to Pierre, but the young man thinks the philosopher speaks anyway. Nature does provide a "cunning alphabet" and each man uses it in his own way. By the time he comes under the spell of Plinlimmon's visage, Pierre views the world cynically because he is unable to carry out his plan to find absolutes. Hence, he interprets everything in a negative way, even Plinlimmon's mysterious face. The man who has subjectively imposed the possibility of order on a chaotic universe now places a shadow of pessimism on all he sees.

Pierre becomes totally victimized by God's confidence trick because he refuses to abandon his initial declaration to be a "Christ-like Enthusiast to Duty" (p. 149), who "will not own a mortal parent, and spurns and rends all mortal bonds" (p. 149). As Ishmael learns, man can find comfort in the ever-inscrutable Universe by tolerating the ambiguities of men and nature. Rather than subjecting himself to the ridicule of the gods, Ishmael turns away and busies himself with secular life. He learns well enough from Ahab that spiritual extremism is disaster. And he also has Queequeg

who shows him the value of brotherhood. Redburn, too, has Harry Bolton who helps him to display confidence in the deceptive social world. Unfortunately, by refusing to alter his initial stance, Pierre undergoes a baptism far more painful than Redburn's because he rejects anyone who could make him see that acceptance of imperfect earthly life is the only release from the fruitless pursuit of ideals.

Lucy is the Queequeg or Harry Bolton of *Pierre*. She remains loving and helpful throughout the entirety of Pierre's trial. Instead of placing confidence in God, Pierre would have been wiser to rely on Lucy who could, at least, assist him in arriving at a practical solution to his dilemma over Isabel. However, in his haste to follow his resolution, Pierre refuses to seek help. He decides, with a good deal of accuracy, that his mother cannot know of Isabel's identity because it would seriously wound her pride. But he makes a fatal mistake by underestimating Lucy's strength and ability to help him. Comparing himself to Hamlet (p. 235), he decides to act with haste and think later. This decision forces him to overlook Lucy's potential. She becomes nothing more than a mathematical symbol in the analytical pursuit of Truth:

> . . . like an algebraist, for the real Lucy he, in his scheming thoughts, had substituted but a sign--some empty *x*--and in the ultimate solution of the problem that empty *x* still figured; not the real Lucy. (p. 253)

Pierre does not realize that Lucy could have helped him in his struggle. In making his decision to act, he assumes that Lucy, like his mother, cannot withstand the shocking knowledge that Isabel exists; hence, he puts her out of the way and rejects her. In doing so, he becomes isolated.

When Lucy is reunited with Pierre in the city and offers to help him write his book, she reveals her resilience. Her willingness to help her lover is one aspect of the humanity which she symbolizes. Pierre, however, rejects Lucy's offer. He believes that as an enthusiast to duty he must take on his task alone. As W.E. Sedgewick notes, Pierre fails to understand that

> the individual cannot discard the common ties that unite him to his kind; and more, men must depend on one another in every great action, whether physical, intellectual or spiritual. Pierre, however, is blind to this vital realization. Like Ahab he would curse the inter-debtedness of men. He has sought to fulfill himself in the opposite direction; that is, by way of absolute, independence or self-dependence.[3]

Unlike Ishmael, Pierre refuses to place confidence in other human beings. He trusts only himself. But alone, he is a helpless man attempting to achieve something beyond human range. By refusing to be flexible, Pierre refuses to be human. Because of this, he ends up in a painful limbo,

[3]William Ellery Sedgewick, Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1945), pp. 150-151.

one in which he cannot rely on the loving acceptance of mankind as symbolized by Lucy (and Ishmael in Moby-Dick) and one in which he cannot sustain his faith in heavenly ideals because he is only human and cannot reach them.

Ishmael becomes the most hopeful character in Moby-Dick not only because he accepts man's inter-debtedness but also because he is able to have confidence that no matter how dismal life may be at times, it will get brighter. Beside rejecting brotherhood, Pierre also fails to develop Ishmael's philosophy about life's fluctuations because he looks beyond earthly life for Truth. In order to overcome the dispair he feels when he is baffled in his search for Truth, Pierre must face life squarely and be enlightened by its ceaseless changing. Placing confidence in the presence of higher values is a totally useless stance: "For there is no faith, and no stoicism, and no philosophy, that a mortal man can possibly evoke, which will stand the final test of a real impassioned onset of Life and Passion . . . For faith and philosophy are air, but events are brass" (p. 403). Unfortunately, Pierre never gets a chance, like Ishmael, to see enough of real life with its contrasts to make him aware of the folly of being totally pessimistic.

Undoubtedly, Pierre's enthusiasm and lack of worldly knowledge do not give him an opportunity to fathom the world's many meanings. Bent on acting ideally, Pierre never procures for himself "that enchanter's wand of the soul, which but

touching the humblest experiences in one's life, straightaway it starts up all eyes, in every one of which are endless significances" (p. 396). Once he has established his naive interpretation of Nature's "cunning alphabet", Pierre cannot see endless significances as Ishmael does. Instead, he remains single-minded in his attitude. He becomes as extreme in his pessimism after he receives Isabel's letter as he was in his cheerfulness before the note radically altered his life. His mood is completely pessimistic by the time Lucy arrives in New York to offer her assistance. When she tries to sell portraits for much needed money, Pierre advises her to lower her prices. This action results from "that certain, stoic, dogged mood of Pierre, born of his recent life, which taught him to never expect any good from anything; but always to anticipate ill . . . (p. 460). Clearly, bad experiences make Pierre exchange his grand idealism for cynicism. Unlike Ishmael, Pierre never takes that one step further past the moment of despair toward the realization that life is not as bad as it seems. Instead, he becomes, like Ahab, a man obsessed with blackness. As a result, he also demonstrates a "woe that is madness" (<u>Moby-Dick</u>, "Try-Works").

Several times Melville indicates Pierre's incompleteness. In one instance, he does so by suggesting that his hero is only in a temporary limbo, a place of darkness one leaves as soon as he sees the necessity for tolerating life's

miseries. Using the image of a climber suspended down a treacherously dark abyss, Melville implies that, while immersed in sorrow, a man often never sees any hope. But it is there:

> It is not the impartially bestowed privilege of the more final insights, that at the same moment they reveal the depths, they do, sometimes, also reveal--though by no means so distinctly--some answering heights. But when only midway down the gulf, its crags wholly conceal the upper vaults, and the wanderer thinks it all one gulf of downward dark. (p. 237)

Pierre never recovers sufficiently from the shock of the crumbling of his innocent world to gain any enlightenment. He remains trapped "midway down the gulf". He never develops any resilience (like Redburn, Ishmael, and Lucy) with which to withstand life's harsher realities while maintaining confidence that the possibility for joy still exists.

Pierre might have escaped the ridicule of the gods if, like Ishmael, he had discarded their game of high ideals for a more reasonable, human one. However, as Pierre's tale indicates, the innocent who is urged on by his confidence in God, finds little opportunity to turn back. He becomes nothing more than a fool, forced to act in a self-destructive manner. With an insight similar to that of some of the twentieth century absurdists, Melville writes that Pierre sees himself as the disabled Titan whose thews "were forestallingly cut as a moose, hanstrung. All things that think, or move, or lie still, seemed as created to torment

him. He seemed gifted with loftiness, merely that it might be dragged down to the mud" (p. 471). In this light, Pierre is emphatically depicted as the victim of a "vast practical joke" created by the ruling powers. And rather than laughing sardonically at this brutality, as does Ishmael, Pierre is immobilized with outrage. The joke, this time, is too severe and cruel. Crushed by his loss of confidence in pure Truth, Pierre cannot react like Ishmael who finds some comfort in the face of life's horrors. Unlike Redburn, Pierre is initiated into death rather than life.

Pierre's failure reflects the pessimism that overwhelmed Melville after he wrote Moby-Dick. In Pierre, suggests F.O. Matthiessen, Melville "encountered great difficulty in objectifying his own sufferings. Especially when Pierre started to be an author, Melville could not keep the boy of nineteen separate from himself at thirty-two, from the man who was finishing his seventh book in as many years, and who, to judge from the texture of its thought and writing was not only discouraged but nearly exhausted."[4] There can be little confidence to be found in a novel whose author had apparently lost his.

[4]F.O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 481.

CHAPTER IV

THE CONFIDENCE-MAN

In *The Confidence-Man* that mysterious governing power which seems to manipulate every man's life is given the human form of a riverboat confidence artist who dupes passengers sailing down the Mississippi on the riverboat *Fidele*. This embodiment is more formlessness than form since the con-man uses so many disguises that it is impossible to tell if he is one person or a number of people playing the same game. As Henig Cohen points out, "Through a protagonist who shifts his shape as readily as he shifts his ground, Melville expresses his commitment to a belief in uncertainty."[1] Having struggled with the ambiguities of the universe in *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, Melville aptly personifies the shifting, deceptive, often malicious cosmos as a cheating, beguiling man who pleads, "Believe in me--take me seriously."

In other novels characters such as Pierre and Ahab sacrifice their lives by taking the universe too seriously. Their attempt to find some absolute truth is futile since the external world never gives any definite answers to its

[1]Henig Cohen, ed., *The Confidence-Man* by Herman Melville (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1967), p. xi.

mystery. At most, it remains indifferent and enigmatic, occasionally lashing out with unexpected malice and fury. In The Confidence-Man the usually silent and distant universe is given a clever and alluring voice. This voice is that of the confidence-man as it begs for some kind of commitment from many of the Fidele's passengers.

The con-man image allows Melville to present several incidents, since the confidence artist confronts as many passengers as possible. With his endless number of masks and gulling rhetoric, the riverboat sharper can be interpreted as the human counterpart of all that is deceptive and cheating in the universe; but he is also a man, a human being who makes his living off other people's weaknesses. Hence, the con-man represents both the general and the particular, the universal confrontation between man and the cosmos and the specific meeting between one man and another. The existence of the seemingly omnipresent trickster emphasizes the painful truth that when a man becomes involved with other men he must be extremely careful, since men are at least as unknowable as the non-human world.

Whereas Ahab's battle with the mighty whale gave an epic and majestic grandeur to man's search for Truth in the universe, in The Confidence-Man a totally different atmosphere prevails. The down-to-earth, almost carnival-like environment of the Mississippi riverboat provides Melville a fitting setting for extensive treatment of the common man's attitudes

toward confidence. Gone is the elevated view of one hero, a Titan, struggling with the gods. Now, Melville extends his perspective to include all humanity.

The con-man knows that most people seek a stable way of life; hence, he is a reality creator. Using uplifting rhetoric, he makes a world which suits his victim's needs. At times he emphasizes the joy of progress and scientific achievement so that he can convince his mark to believe in him and the product he is selling. At other times he speaks of a totally benevolent and charitable world so that he can induce people to give donations to their suffering brothers. In this manner he is able to cover the spectrum from materialism to spiritualism.

The con-man's uncanny ability to make people see the world in a particular way, often totally spurious and misleading, is a reminder of the metaphysical concern with illusion and reality in Pierre and Moby-Dick. As a human representation of the ambiguous universe, the trickster emerges as a person who is so disguised that no one can tell his true character or intentions. Much of his success results from the way people perceive him and the ideas he preaches. As his repeated triumphs prove, most people accept his invitation to confidence, often in spite of themselves.

The link between the con-man, as symbol of the external world, and his victims, judging him with their

subjective thoughts, parallels the relationship between the internal mind and the outer environment which is examined fully in the instances of Pierre and Ahab. A major question in Moby-Dick is whether the universe (the White Whale) is actually malicious or whether the malevolence is totally due to Ahab's projecting his tormented soul onto what is outside of him. In Pierre it becomes apparent that Melville's hero will never know absolute truth beyond himself because he can never completely fathom his inner self. The sea captain and the innocent young man try to get beneath illusory masks, but their task is complicated by the fact that their own egos may be creating the false appearances they wish to destroy. (Recall Nature's "cunning alphabet"). Similarly, each character who becomes involved with the con-man may be placing trust in the illusions which have sustained his own life, especially in the security of business affairs or the belief that the universe is totally benevolent.

In The Confidence-Man Melville continues his consideration of materialism begun in other novels. For example, in the earlier books, Riga steals money from Redburn and Ahab decides to lure on his crew with the doubloon as a prize; now, many of the customers met by the con-man are duped because of their greed. One scene has the confidence-man disguised as John Truman, president and transfer agent of the Black Rapids Coal Company, tricking

a college student into buying bogus stock because the student is certain he knows how to handle himself in business matters (Chap. IX). In this case, the money-minded collegian errs by placing confidence in his ability to be astute in financial matters. In another scene, Truman procures money from a miser who thinks he can have his investment tripled by Truman (Chap. XV). These episodes and others provide Melville with an opportunity to present a scathingly satirical attack on the world's money grubbers since they, as represented by the greedy travellers on the *Fidele*, are often made into fools by the slick confidence artist.

But Melville's attack on American materialism is only one aspect of the novel's confidence theme. Using several episodes, Melville re-examines innocence and brotherhood, two of the most prominent concepts found in the novels discussed to this point. Again, a key issue involves how far man should pursue Truth--or, to put it another way, how much illusion and imperfection a man should accept. Because these ideas have been the ones dealt with in the previously analysed novels, they will be discussed further in this paper.

The confidence theme of the three earlier novels often considers the problem of trusting men and the universe. For example, Redburn initially distrusts men because of their evil; however, he eventually realizes that he must sometimes trust them despite their bad qualities. Similarly,

Ishmael learns from Queequeg that trust in men should be chosen over distrust of them. In contrast, Ahab is the total distruster who has no confidence in the universe he attempts to fathom. In The Confidence-Man the choice between trust and distrust is central to every confrontation between the con-man and his potential victims. By repeatedly showing individuals trying to choose between the two stances, and by indicating how well the trickster can influence each person's decision, Melville emphasizes the difficulties inherent in a world in which men must live with each other.

The boundaries delimiting trust (confidence) and distrust (non-confidence) are established immediately in The Confidence-Man. Melville's dizzying portrait of the confidence-man's escapades aboard the Mississippi riverboat, Fidele, begins with a contrast illustrating a TRUST/NO TRUST pattern which exists throughout the riverboat's voyage down the mighty American river.[2] A deaf mute clothed in ambiguous white holds up a series of signs beginning with "Charity thinketh no evil" and ending with "Charity never Faileth". Clearly, with each new sign, the mute's message becomes increasingly harder to believe. The final statement appears to be the excessively innocent cry of one who totally believes in the power of benevolence. This extreme faith in ideal charity is a reminder of Pierre's total reliance on

[2]Walter Dubler, "Theme and Structure in Melville's The Confidence-Man," AL XXXIII (November 1961), p. 310.

absolute Virtue in his tragic tale. As Pierre's failure proves, such confidence can be destructive because higher values like virtue are elusive and almost impossible to attain. Aboard the _Fidele_, the "lunacy" of the mute's placards, as they are described by some passengers, is heightened by a vastly different sign, that of the river-boat barber which states quite bluntly NO TRUST. If the mute is honest (it is difficult to tell in the book because there are so many tricksters), then he takes a point of view toward confidence opposed to that of the barber. The contrast between complete trust and the lack of it provides a continuum along which the farcical interplay aboard the _Fidele_ occurs; accordingly, almost every incident which arises after this original distinction involves a dialectic between confidence and non-confidence.

Total trust or the lack of it are worthless if they are held all the time, since one leads to the suffering of disillusionment and the other to misanthropy. The man who has faith in everyone and everything usually discovers that he is being cheated. On the other hand, the scowling misanthrope must bear the weight of isolation and bitterness. Paradoxically, however, matters are not much better for the man in the middle who refuses to commit himself to a one-sided view since he must always wrestle with the decision to trust or not whenever the appropriate situation arises.

In the "charitable lady" episode (Chap. VIII) of his

novel, Melville focuses on a truster, a person so innocent that she cannot think of any other position to take besides complete acceptance of her fellow man. In this scene the question of innocence, whether or not men should lose it, is re-assessed. In Moby-Dick, with Ishmael's education as his example, Melville seems convinced that the loss of innocence is necessary for the development of the aware individual. In Pierre he asks, "Wherefore have Gloom and Grief been celebrated of old as the selectest chamberlains to knowledge? Wherefore is it, that not to know Gloom and Grief is not to know aught that an herioc man should learn?" (Pierre, p. 237). But in this "charitable lady" episode he insinuates that, for some, the loss of innocence may be unnecessary--or, at least, do more harm than good.

In this brief encounter the confidence-man, disguised as an agent for a Widow and Orphan's asylum, flatters the charitable lady into giving a donation. Because he notices that the woman is reading from the Book of Corinthians, the pseudo-agent is able to sense her kind-heartedness. He quickly falls in with the lady by mentioning that he, too, is a man of benevolence. As a result of his smooth approach, she is forced into "a natural struggle between charity and prudence,"[3] but trusting that the stranger is a man of

[3]Herman Melville, The Confidence-Man, Std. Edn. Vol. XII (New York: Russell and Russell, 1963), p. 57. All other quotes will be noted textually by page number.

charity, she gives him a donation. Tested in the life values she most cherishes, benevolence and good-will, the lady readily accepts the agent.

The woman is an innocent who sees only good as did Pierre in his earliest youth. In whatever disguises he chooses, the con-man can dupe people like her because they are not very distrustful or sceptical. Experience has never led them into a painful and enlightening choice between TRUST and NO TRUST; instead, they remain trustworthy, always ready to show confidence in those of a benevolent exterior. Melville insists in some of his novels that this state is totally treacherous. The man who has no doubt of knowledge of evil is "undeveloped" (Moby-Dick, "Try Works") and he is always the victim of corrupt powers like the confidence-man. However, there is another point of view; if the innocent is never made aware of deception, he will remain perfectly content. Illusion can be comforting. The charitable lady loses her money to the con-man, but she gains the satisfaction of being generous. Her vision of a sunshine world is maintained and she suffers no disillusionment. The benevolent appearance of the universe that the Seminole agent creates for her is the one that pleases her most.

The apparent joy of the charitable lady raises a most perplexing question about the fall from bliss. For themselves, for their confidence and well-being, does it not seem better that people like the kindhearted woman remain

ignorant? The intrusion of truth into their lives might bring distrust, insecurity, misery, an incessant struggle between charity and prudence. Pierre's catastrophe serves as an example. The shattering of illusion destroys him. This tragedy and the charitable lady's bliss hint that Melville regrets that men must undergo a Fall and lose their naivete.

In his analysis of Melville's works, R.W.B. Lewis states, "Melville took the loss of innocence and the world's betrayal of hope as the supreme challenge to understanding and to art. He wanted not to accept this betrayal; and for a while he kept going back over the ground of the experience as if to prove the betrayal untrue or unavoidable."[4] As Redburn and Pierre suggest, Melville finds the betrayal of hope "unavoidable", at least, if a person wishes to be completely initiated into life. It could be very comfortable to remain ignorant but, nevertheless, without the removal of the protective appearances of total joy and confidence, people like the charitable lady are unable to meet life as it actually is. And if a person is to become a well-rounded human being, he must sooner or later become involved with all existence, both good and bad. In addition, without some knowledge of evil, people like the benevolent lady would be constantly cheated and misused.

[4]The American Adam, pp. 129-30.

Strangely enough, it is the confidence-man who makes the point that only experience can bring a man to a state in which he can astutely choose between confidence and non-confidence. The trickster, disguised as a herb doctor selling Omni-Balsamic Reinvigorator, convinces an invalid to buy some of his medicine. With his sale of Reinvigorator to the sick man completed, the herb doctor warns his customer that if he tries to buy any more medicine he should beware of non-genuine products. Here, the confidence-man seems to be trying to monopolize the herbal medicine market, and his tactic gets him into trouble. The dying man quickly spots the confidence artist's unusual deviation from total trust and he cries, "You told me to have confidence, said that confidence was indispensable, and here you preach to me distrust. Ah! truth will out!" (109). The con-man, in an attempt to protect his game, replies, "I told you, you must have confidence, unquestioning confidence in the genuine medicine, and the genuine _me_" (109). Here, the sharper demands with a typical lack of logic that he and his products are above questioning but that all other things should be examined. He is asking for allegiance to the reality he has created and no other. In his smooth selling job the trickster has manoeuvred himself into a corner. His attempt to get out of it leads to an important point about confidence.

The doctor defends his statement about being sceptical by relying on the paradox that trust comes from distrust.

In answer to the sick man's queries he rejoins, "from evil comes good. Distrust is a stage to confidence" (109). Although it appears to be a deft move by the doctor, this irony sums up one perspective in Melville's analysis of man's need for confidence: perhaps trust does grow from distrust. Because experience teaches a man which deceptions in life to look out for, only when he becomes aware of these pitfalls can he show a limited confidence in his environment. This stance, arrived at by the discovery of when to distrust, may be the only reasonable position to take in this world. As Redburn eventually discovers, by an arduous process of elimination or trial and error, a man finally arrives at a point where he is better equipped to decide what things to accept or reject, trust or distrust.

It is clear that before a man can properly choose between trust and no trust he must undergo some experiences which will improve his knowledge of the way men really act. But as Ahab and Pierre demonstrate, knowledge of evil can draw a person into two undesirable positions. A person can become so obsessed with knowing the truth that he becomes too analytical of every situation. Or he can assume a role of total scepticism wherein he refuses to be bothered by a perplexing selection of confidence. Instead, he stands rigid in his denial of all men. He exists apart from any involvement with men and thereby protects himself from being fooled. Melville considers the danger of being too

analytical and distrustful in some of the scenes in The Confidence-Man--in a few cases, men discuss this aspect of the confidence theme as a part of their conversation. In one particular case, a gruff backwoodsman, Pitch, displays the characteristics of the inflexible distruster.

One episode in which Melville approaches the dialectic between acceptance and doubt of appearance involves a brief discussion between two men who never directly meet the con-man (Chap. XVIII). Their distance from the con-man gives an objective quality to their considerations of man's pursuit of truth. Before the two passengers begin their conversation about whether one should examine situations too closely, they witness a rough hewn "Titan in homespun" as he refuses to buy some Samaritan Pain Dissuader from the herb doctor/con-man. The man of the wilderness rudely rebukes the bogus doctor with the maxim, "some pains cannot be eased but by producing death" (115). This scene induces the two men (one with a hooked nose and the other with auburn hair) to consider whether the Titan should have exposed the doctor or whether he should have left him alone. This particular controversy is central to the confidence motif since it deals with the problem of how far man should pursue Truth or how closely one should scrutinize what he sees.

The auburn-haired gentleman contends that it is right for the Titan to unmask the doctor, for all illusions to be stripped away. The hook-nosed man, who sees a danger in

seeking truth too thoroughly, uses a morsel of Shakespearian wisdom to emphasize his point. He begins his argument with, "But do you think it the fair thing to unmask an operator that way?" (117). Then he expands this hypothesis with, "Or as Hamlet says were it to consider the thing too curiously?" (117). As in previous cases, the necessity for illusion is considered. The hook-nosed gentleman argues that too much questioning and examination is not a good approach. Proof of this comes from Hamlet and his Melvillian counterpart, Pierre. Both of these men suffer immensely because they examine their dilemmas too closely. As Hamlet, Pierre, and Ahab indicate, human beings do have some need for illusion, for without it there is nothing but endless doubts about what one perceives. Absolute truth is impossible to find. There is no certainty; hence, over-dissection can be futile. The short verbal exchange between the two passengers, then, presents an important dialectic in man's search for a comfortable existence. Not only grand and resolute heroes, but every man must decide how much caution he will use in his daily life. A man cannot be openly accepting all the time, nor can he peruse every moment so closely that he becomes immobilized. As the controversy between the two riverboat passengers suggests, there are always extreme alternatives to every situation. But adherence to extremes puts a man into an unbalanced state which prevents him from properly assessing each new incident.

One need only consider Pierre's rejection of Lucy while he pursues Truth to realize the foolishness of extremism. In The Confidence-Man Melville never pointedly suggests that inflexible stances are unwise; however, the folly evident in those who hold such rigid positions implies that a middle ground of fluctuating confidence might be better.

Rather than constantly vacillating between Trust and No Trust some men do adopt a cynical view that prevents them from displaying confidence in anybody or anything. Ahab is Melville's most intense portrait of this type. His counterpart in The Confidence-Man is Pitch, a Missouri backwoodsman who refuses to be fooled by the confidence artist's ploys. Pitch does display some admirable characteristics even though he is anti-social. For one thing, he learns from experience. And, as Pitch's interaction with the con-man proves, doubt, especially if it is reinforced by experience, is a valuable protection against deception. The rough-hewn Missourian's first victory comes when he advises an old miser not to buy the herb doctor's remedies because Nature is not all good (as the bogus medicine peddler contends) (Chap. XXI). In contrast to the con-man, Pitch points out that Nature is the cause of disease, death, and destruction. The herb doctor tries to defend Nature by saying that it gives the Missourian his strength and health; however, the backwoodsman will have nothing to do with this argument. Experience has taught him that Nature is a mysterious mixture

of beneficial and destructive forces. This knowledge places him in direct opposition to the con-man/herb doctor who preaches that Nature is all healing. The Missourian, because of his life in the wilderness, knows better. He has, in this case, a small piece of certainty which prevents him from being fooled.

By defying the medicine peddler, Pitch typifies the self-reliant frontier character who conquered America for others. Coming from Missouri (long known as the "show me" state), he demands proof of his fellow's claims. In addition, because he finds little virtue in man, he ventured out into the less crowded frontier, ironically making the way for the ones he disdains to follow. Demonstrating blunt honesty, the backwoodsman admits his scepticism toward mankind and Nature when he states emphatically, "I have confidence in distrust" (143). With this stance he is opposite to the supposedly philanthropic herb doctor.

Despite the Missourian's weighty interference, the herb doctor continues to insist to the miser that herbal medicines are beneficial. To do so he uses an argument similar to the one he used with the sick man of a previous encounter. With reference to his present customer, he argues, "Granting that his dependence on my medicine is vain, is it kind to deprive him of what, in mere imagination, if nothing more, may help eke out, with hope, his disease?" (145). Like several other passengers aboard the <u>Fidele</u>, the miser needs

illusion. Again, the trickster contends that the mind can triumph over matter. This hypothesis, that hope, no matter how spuriously induced, is better than none at all, is quickly challenged by the pragmatic, down-to-earth backwoodsman. Hence, the controversy over the need for illusion is re-emphasized.

Pitch, who disagrees with the doctor's metaphysic comments cuttingly to the miser:

> 'Y e s, it is pitiless in one like me to speak too honestly to one like you. You are a late sitter-up in this life; past man's usual bed-time; and truth, though with some it makes a wholesome breakfast, proves to all a supper too hearty. Hearty food, taken late, gives bad dreams.' (146)

With this metaphor, the Missourian sarcastically admits that truth is too overwhelming for many, especially the weak and the old. Perhaps men need some comforting illusions because the truth, whether it be that life, in general, is absurd or whether it be that secular life is filled with deception, is too devastating. Pitch makes his point even clearer when he states,

> 'with some minds, truth is, in effect, not so cruel a thing after all, seeing that, like a loaded pistol found by poor devils of savages, it raises more wonder than terror--its peculiar virtue being unguessed, unless, indeed, by indiscreet handling, it should happen to go off of itself.' (146)

Truth fascinates man, but quite often he is ignorant of its deadly power to dissolve all of the appearances that make life comfortable.

Pierre Glendinning, in his innocence, is like that savage discovering a loaded pistol. He becomes obsessed with ideal Truth but, like a gun, it goes off on him--his seeking leads to a destruction of his psyche as he becomes aware of the futility of his search. Indeed, truth is not for everyone; only the strong like Pitch can withstand it.

At this point in the novel, the Missourian appears to be the kind of man needed to repel the sly con-man. He is the self-reliant sceptic who is willing to accept truth no matter how devastating it is. Clearly, the frontiersman relies on his own personal strength in dealing with life's difficult moments. His avowal to be a distruster implies that he believes that dependence on others is foolhardy. This perspective becomes more obvious when Pitch engages the herb doctor in a conversation about the abolition of slavery. In reply to the Missourian's question about abolitionism, the pseudo-doctor admits,

> 'If by abolitionist you mean zealot, I am none; but if you mean a man, who being a man, feels for all men, slaves included, and by any lawful act, opposed to nobody's enmity, would willingly abolish suffering (supposing it, in its degree, to exist) from among mankind, irrespective of colour, than I am what you say.' (149)

Using a rhetoric typical of him, the con-man defines himself as a liberal humanist who has grand sentiments but who wishes to harm no one in seeing them carried out. Pitch reacts quickly to this middle-of-the-road position by saying,

> 'Picked and prudent sentiments. You are the moderate man, the invaluable understrapper of the wicked man. You, the moderate man, may be used for wrong, but are useless for right.' (149)

Richard Chase singles out this comment to argue that The Confidence-Man is an attack on American liberalism.[5] The liberal is usually victimized by those with one-sided views, argues Chase, and the con-man proves this by manipulating many of the weak-willed, essentially liberal passengers aboard the Fidele. Often it is the moderate man who refuses to cling to one exaggerated point of view who allows those with strong beliefs to be in control. And, like the innocent, he has difficulty in choosing between Trust and No Trust because his liberalism prevents him from quickly denouncing others.

On the other hand, men like Pitch, who themselves have clearly-defined attitudes, are usually much safer from becoming understrappers. However, they are in danger of being just as bigoted or one-sided as their adversaries. Pitch proves this when he defends himself against the herb doctor. By refusing to believe in the peddler's claims, he does protect himself; but the distrust he displays, especially if it is, as he says, perpetual, is not an admirable quality. The backwoodsman not only repels the con-man but also he shuns all mankind. And as Ishmael learns from Queequeg

[5]Richard Chase, "Melville's The Confidence-Man," Kenyon Review (Winter 1949), pp. 122-140.

in Moby-Dick, this avoidance of humanity leaves a man without help when he needs it.

It is the liberal who is morally correct because he refuses to overlook other people's opinions. Unfortunately, the tendency to respect other people often leads to an inability to act. The liberal must continually struggle with the dilemma of wanting to accept other people when it might be better to reject them. Rather than denying the con-man because he is a cheat, the moderate lets him have his say. Accordingly, all the confidence artist need do is create a situation in which morally upstanding values seem prominent and the middle-of-the-road individual will go along with it. It is for this reason that the trickster constantly challenges his prey with "Have confidence in me; take me seriously; believe in me" because decent-minded liberals will feel compelled to listen to him. The liberal, tolerant of other people, is usually ethically correct although often powerless against evil-doers; thus, the con-man flourishes in a world of kind, humanistic beings. Only the sour but self-reliant individuals like Pitch prevent the world from being totally governed by those with evil intent.

It seems an absurd universe in which the close-minded self-reliant individuals, not the open-minded but dependent liberals, are best equipped to survive. Of course, the liberal need not lack self-reliance or the ability to make difficult decisions about whom to trust; however, the

balance between tolerance of others' values and firm commitment to one's own beliefs is hard to maintain.

In an ensuing encounter with the con-man disguised as a Philosophical Intelligence Officer, Pitch reveals quite emphatically his distaste for men. Rather than tolerating mankind, he chooses an avenue of rejection that makes him unbalanced. He rants to the P.I. Officer about his dislike of boys because they are lazy rascals (153). Clearly, Pitch makes a crucial error by rejecting imperfect beings. As Ishmael and Redburn discover, without some commitment to men, one is cast alone in the universe like Ahab and Pierre. But Pitch apparently cares little for this truth. He wants something completely reliable; therefore, he replaces his confidence in human beings with complete trust in machines (153). In doing so, he rejects the uncertainty of the human spirit in favour of physical devices.

As soon as the Philosophical Intelligence Officer sense's Pitch's faith in mechanical inventions, he is able to cunningly trick him. When approached by the herb doctor, Pitch is able to protect himself because experience has taught him to doubt natural products, but he is now unable to defend himself. The P.I.O. is a man who uses scientific study to find boys and men for domestic help. He mentions the "analytical study of man" and "the state of boyhood scientifically viewed" (160) in order to interest the Missourian. Then, by using several supposedly logical

arguments, the con-man proceeds with an attempt to convince Pitch that rascally boys grow into good men.

The Missourian remains uncommited until the con-man adds flattery to his approach. Pitch's reaction to the P.I.O.'s guess that the frontiersman is a kind-hearted soul hiding behind a mask of gruffness (168) adds to the already multitudinous ambiguities of the novel. In what seems to be a complete about-face Pitch replies, "Well, really, now--really" . . . "really, really, now, I don't know but that I have been a little bit too hard upon those five-and-thirty boys of mine" (168). Suddenly, the overtly misanthropic, sceptical backwoodsman takes back much of what he has said about his working boys. This capitulation suggests that Pitch wears a mask of cynicism in order to protect himself from tricksters. Despite his statement that he can face the truth, he uses illusion for self-defense. Sensing that people truly are cheats, he therefore uses an exterior of gruffness to protect him from becoming too involved with individuals who could prove despicable. Like Redburn on his journey to Liverpool, the Missourian seems to withdraw into himself in order to escape the unpredictable, potentially misleading external world. But with his protective mask removed, Pitch quickly accepts the con-man's scheme about boys and pays in advance for a new helper. Ironically, the distruster's first display of confidence results in his being deceived.

Made a fool once for trusting someone, Pitch is forced further into solitude. A cosmopolitan dressed in the garb of assorted nations greets the backwoodsman with an ultra-benevolent outlook, but the Missourian rejects him. The cosmopolitan poses as a philanthropist who considers "the philosophy of disteem for man" (178) to be extremely unprofitable. He contends that in his relationship to the social world "one must take a part, assume a character, stand ready in a sensible way to play the fool" (178). Again, it is this type of comment which makes the con-man an enigmatic character. If he were not using them as a preparation for his next act of underhandedness, his words would be wise: unless they wish to suffer through isolation men should become involved with other men. They ought to do this, says the con-man, even though they are aware that at times, they will be made fools because they are part of a flawed, sinful environment in which some men try to cheat others.

With his barrier established anew, Pitch opposes the cosmopolitan's open tolerance of mankind. A dialectic develops between philanthrope and misanthrope in which the man of the world reveals that he revels in the gaiety of humanity, that he drinks in man like wine, while Pitch counters with the charge that all the cosmopolitan says is both spurious and unwise. After the world traveller relates a story of an old teetotalling woman whose churlish nature

was improved by daily imbibition of wine, Pitch replies:

> 'If I take your parable right . . . the meaning is, that one cannot enjoy life with gusto unless he renounce the too-sober view of life. But since the too-sober view is, doubtless, nearer true than the too-drunken; I, who rate truth, though cold water, above untruth, though Tokay, will stick to my earthen jug.' (179-180)

Here, the Missourian repeats, in a different form, his credo that stark truth is far better than pleasant illusion. By placing faith in the aescetic, straightforward, serious view of life, Pitch has numerous companions. The Transcendentalists, Emerson and Thoreau, revelled in the pure, "cold water" life. In addition, in Moby-Dick Ishmael learns that there is a "wisdom that is woe", that a knowledge of life's sorrows results in a fully developed human being. Clearly, life is not all wine and gaiety, and the man who knows this is closer to understanding the way life really is.

Pitch is a perplexing character because, despite his continual self-reliant demands for truth, he refuses the truth that men should rely on each other despite their evil. The Missourian is a frustrating mixture of positive and negative qualities and, as a result, he is a "near miss" in Melville's search for the balanced man.

Melville tantalizes the reader with Pitch. After an innocent like the charitable lady is led astray by the con-man (posing as an agent for a Widow's and Orphan's

Asylum), it is refreshing to see him (masked as a Nature-loving herb doctor) abruptly shunned by Pitch. The backwoodsman's stern, forthright rejection of the herb doctor is appealing since, up to this point, the man of many disguises has had no difficulty at succeeding with his game. Finally, someone escapes the trap by standing up to the spurious individual. Unlike most of the other passengers, Pitch refuses to take the con-man seriously; however, his victory is brief since he quickly falls victim to the confidence artist in a new role. In addition, Pitch is ultimately disappointing because he is extremely anti-social. His ability to make a quick decision about his situation is something many men yearn for--but his total scepticism is not particularly admirable.

Perhaps, though, Pitch's distrust of men is the only safe pose in the enigmatic social world. The Confidence-Man's conclusion suggests this.

The novel's final scene involves a meeting between the con-man/cosmopolitan and an innocent old man who is the Master of the Faith that all is well in the world.[6] While the cosmopolitan is convincing the old man not to worry about some words in the Apocrypha, a young, ragged boy enters the scene and sells the gentleman a bogus money belt and a confusing Counterfeit detector. The boy is unlike

[6] Chase, KR, p. 134.

most of the travellers aboard the Fidele in that he appears to know that the cosmopolitan is a confidence-man; however, he only slyly admits it. When he tries to sell a lock to the cosmopolitan, he (the cosmopolitan) replies, "Excuse me, my fine fellow, but I never use blacksmiths' things" (328). The boy sagaciously quips back, "Those who give the blacksmith most work seldom do . . ." (328). He knows the confidence game because he plays it too. The money belt he sells the old man is probably a life preserver.

The boy, a peddler of Non-Confidence,[7] seems to be the offspring of an American ridden with confidence types. If the confidence artist can obtain money using trust as his weapon then the boy, in ironic rebellion, makes his profit from the opposite sentiment, No Trust.

Both Pitch and the peddler boy reveal that complete distrust can be advantageous in a world filled with tricksters. The former suggests that the best way to avoid man's deception is to avoid it and the latter suggests that the best way to survive in a corrupt world is to use that corruption to your advantage. Certainly, Pitch and the boy are not particularly admirable, but they do have some success in outwitting the confidence-man. As a result, one wonders if their approach is the only way to survive in a deceptive world. No character appears in The Confidence-Man to make

[7]Chase, KR, p. 135.

one think otherwise.

Only by inference can the reader conclude that a man like Ishmael could stand up to the confidence-man. Ishmael certainly fares well against the God/con-man in Moby-Dick by laughing at the tricks God plays on men and by following Queequeg's advice about brotherhood, but no character like him appears in The Confidence-Man. In fact, by depicting the universe and the powers that control it as forces in the guise of the con-man, Melville makes the possibility of another Ishmael quite dim. In this new situation men must play fierce mental games with their cosmic adversary, games which they seldom win.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the novels discussed in this paper, Melville creates a world filled with deception and illusion. One is reminded of a "house of horrors" complete with unexpected shocks and unseen manipulation. In addition, men with beguiling masks occupy each room making sure that the customers become completely involved.

Redburn and Pierre enter the house of fright for the first time. Horrified, Redburn reaches out for someone to comfort him (Harry Bolton) but as soon as he can leave, Redburn abandons his companion who must continue to wind through the convoluted pathways of the carnival house. Meanwhile Pierre flounders in the darkness, refusing to reach out for anyone. He expects the operator of the horror show to help him get out of the black maze in which he finds himself. But no one appears. Instead, Pierre remains trapped in the cavernous house as he stares, bewildered, at a distant, unattainable image.

In another part of the house of terrors, Ahab chases madly after a bobbing white form. He becomes frenzied as he searches for the figure who dangles the pasteboard mask before him. However, there may be no malicious puppeteer at all. It seems that Ahab may be in a room of mirrors, each one reflecting his madness.

Unfortunately, the room is so cleverly disguised that it is impossible to tell how it is operated.

Despite the anguish of many of the visitors to the mysterious house, one man is able to laugh at the horrors flashed before him. Ishmael wanders through each terrifying room, sometimes frightened, but always aware there is an exit to the sun outside. In addition, Ishmael has a friend with him--one who can help him through the most difficult moments. In this respect, Ishmael is luckier than most. Others who seek help are greeted by smiling strangers who eventually cheat them.

Who is it that runs this carnival nightmare? No one really knows. Perhaps it is an elusive, white-clad god who presses buttons and pulls levers which control every imaginable horror. Perhaps it is a team of tricksters bent on totally confusing all who enter. Or, most frighteningly, perhaps the house runs solely on the energy of those who enter it. In that case, props and wires do not exist. Instead, the walls of the rooms are bare and on them are cast the hallucinatory images of each individual that enters. Hence, some like Ishmael leave thinking that their experience was not too awful. Others, however, become so nightmarishly involved that they are incapable of leaving. They remain trapped as self-victims or as victims of the sardonic, always-hidden operator.

Life is like a "house of horrors"; unfortunately,

it cannot be entered on a Saturday afternoon and be forgotten by the same evening. Men must continually deal with life's ambiguity and unpredictability. They must decide when to display confidence despite the difficulty of doing so. In short, they must find a way to be confident "in a world in which nothing is what it appears to be, in which the only thing knowable is that nothing can be known, and the only thing believable is that nothing can be believed."[1] Men must continue to guess at the meaning of existence even though questions will rarely be answered. As Ishmael so profoundly states,

> There is no steady unretracing progress in this life; we do not advance through fixed gradations, and the last one pause:--through infancy's unconscious spell, boyhood's thoughtless faith, adolescence' doubt (the common doom), then scepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in manhood's pondering pose of If. But once gone through, we trace the round again; and are infants, boys, and men, and Ifs eternally.[2]

The search for confidence lasts and lasts: the everlasting guess spins in an eternal circle.

[1]Henig Cohen, ed., The Confidence-Man by Herman Melville, p. x.

[2]Moby-Dick, Chap. CXIV, p. 265.

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