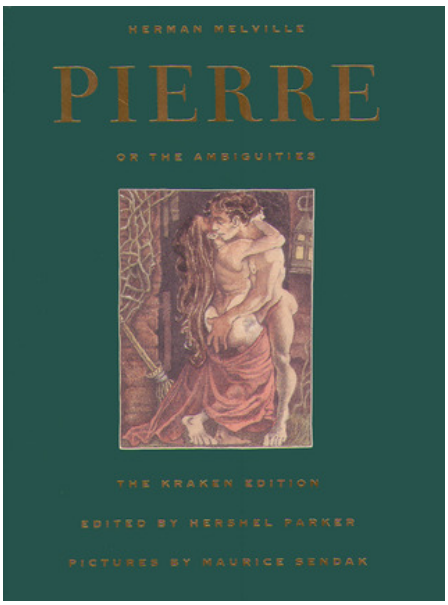

Pierre: or, the Ambiguities

Herman Melville , Maurice Sendak (illustrator) , Hershel Parker (editor)

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Pierre: or, the Ambiguities Herman Melville , Maurice Sendak (illustrator) , Hershel Parker (editor) HarperCollins is proud to present this controversial masterpiece of American literature, now restored to its original form and illuminated with 30 full-color pictures by Maurice Sendak.

Pierre: or, the Ambiguities Details

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From Reader Review Pierre: or, the Ambiguities for online ebook

Charles Berman says

"Pierre" is a shocking, stunning book that, I think, deliberately gives readers what they do not want, and which they may not know they are glad to have gotten. It's a progression from a Utopian life to literally, death and damnation, the main character having ruined multiple lives in the process, all the while thinking he is doing the altruistic deed, and reaching an enlightenment of thought which only leads him to despicable acts. All the while it is delivered in intricate, beautiful, flawlessly precise and digressive prose in pages filled with profundities, hints at profundities inexpressible which may generate what they will in the readers mind, and brooding meditations -- including on the inexpressibility of profundities.

As such, it is a grim and painful book that uses the mechanisms and reversals of humor to deliver some humor --- but mainly tragedy. If "Moby Dick" was an exploration by Melville of the wondrous, dreadful, powerful, inconceivably vast and inexpressible mystery of the world that surrounds us, "Pierre" not only touches on that but sounds the equally deep mysteries that shroud our own souls, thoughts and intentions from ourselves. It makes us realize that not only are we utterly unknowable to ourselves, so is divining truth in what is right and wrong -- if such exists -- impossible. That's a theme that is inspired, stunningly developed, and wrenching to accept.

I think "Pierre" is a work of deeply iconoclastic genius, its author intent on expressing haunting truths which are not only normally left unsaid but which are downright disturbing to contemplate. We are left knowing only that as Pierre has destroyed lives while trying to save them and been drawn incestuously to a sister without knowing it --- and done these for motives he cannot himself conceive, that we just as easily do such things ourselves.

Illiterate says

A parody of sentimental melodrama. All is ambiguity - choice laced with fate, good with evil, truth with insincerity, love with vice.

Derek Davis says

It's a shame Melville was never able to get this all together. I'd give the first half about 10 stars if they were available, the second half (largely reconstructed in this edition from notes, partial attempts and mangles) about 2.
In the first half, Melville employed not only virtually every style ever previously attempted, but introduced stylings that didn't reappear for close to a century: Gertrude Stein as one example. Brilliant. The second half is an unrelieved mess.

William2.1 says

It should be noted that this is the shorter version originally intended by Melville, and does not include several later chapters which were written by the author out of despair after his previous book, Moby-Dick: or, The Whale, was called "blasphemous" by certain now-forgotten critics.

Frederick says

[My review is of the standard edition of PIERRE. The Kraken Edition, to which Goodreads defaults, is wonderful, but the difference between it and the standard edition is very significant, inasmuch as the Kraken Edition dispenses with chapters Melville included, behind his publisher's back, after the book was accepted. The Kraken Edition is an improvement, and has Maurice Sendak's beautiful illustrations. I strongly recommend it. But my review is of the book as marred by Melville himself.]
I read Pierre when I was nineteen. I believe that is the age Pierre is at the start of the book.
Literary titan though Melville was for writing MOBY-DICK and BILLY BUDD, he was prone to scuttling his own ship. After PIERRE was accepted by the publisher, Melville went to the printer and, without asking the publisher's permission, had the printer insert several chapters. This is proof Melville was willing to act against his own interest. The inserted chapters have nothing to do with the rest of the book. Suddenly, the main character is writing pamphlets. It's as if, suddenly, halfway through GONE WITH THE WIND, Scarlett O'Hara had become a landscape painter.
The inserted chapters are, of course, in themselves, very funny. Melville is making fun of Greenwich Village eccentrics. Indeed, these chapters occur in Greenwich Village. The Village then was a lot like the Village as it is today. But this section of the book would have been great, and might have received a general readership, if it had been issued as a stand-alone work.
My feeling is that PIERRE, which followed within a year or two of MOBY-DICK, is not a crafty work, but an ill-conceived effort by a man who'd exhausted his strength performing the Herculean task which proceeded it.
The thing to know is that it was with MOBY-DICK, unquestionably his masterpiece, Melville's fortunes slid downward. Before MOBY-DICK, he'd written four or five popular novels of maritime adventure. At the age of 32, when he wrote MOBY-DICK, Melville was a highly respected novelist whose works were well-known. Readers began to get a bit irritated with him when he wrote OMOO, its philosophical excursions getting in the way of the escapism the readers wanted. He wrote a very regular book after OMOO and then, with MOBY-DICK, returned to philosophy on a grand scale, matching it with a profound, symbolic take of the deepest meaning. The tragic part of his literary life starts here, because it is with MOBY-DICK, the book we know him for, the book universally regarded as the greatest ever written by an American, that he began to be treated by his peers, the general readership and his publishers, as a pariah. In the five or so years after MOBY-DICK he wrote PIERRE, THE CONFIDENCE-MAN and ISRAEL POTTER. Then he virtually disappears from the literary scene, putting out occasional poems and the really difficult book-length poem, CLAREL. He dies about forty years later, the manuscript to BILLY BUDD left unread in a drawer.
When one of his circle read his obituary, she said, "I thought he'd been dead for years."

Venus Smurf says

I gave this book five stars only because it brings back fond memories. The actual book is probably the worst thing ever penned, and intentionally so.

From what I understand, Melville wrote this as a response to bad reviews for one of his other works. He'd

come to believe that the public would only love a novel if it contained scandalous themes and that none of his superior works would ever be bestsellers for this reason. The quality of the writing itself didn't make a difference, and so he chose the worst things he could imagine--incest being only one of the included themes--and set out to purposely write the worst book he could.

He succeeded.

This is...really terrible, actually. The book is about a rich boy, Pierre, with a serious Oedipal complex. When a woman claiming to be his half-sister shows up on his door one day, he handles his attraction to her (ew) in incredibly stupid ways, first by breaking off with his milksop fiancée, then by informing his mother that he'd married his own sister just to give her claims to the estate without exposing his father's adultery. He then runs off with his sister and lives with her in sin in, wait for it, a former church. The pair becomes a trio when his ex-fiancée decides to follow and join in the sinning, even though no woman of that time would have even considered doing so.

It gets better. Pierre, like Melville, decides to write a book. He never publishes anything, though, believing he can only write dark truths the market doesn't want. In reality, he just sucks at it and can't earn any money. He spends his days ranting about capitalists and insensitive audiences and annoying pretty much everybody.

...which is apparently Melville's cue to do the same. He seems to forget he's supposedly penning a novel at this point and spends the majority of the book ranting and complaining. He also keeps going on about trees, which still doesn't make sense even in a book not meant to make sense.

In any case, Melville remembers his characters just before the book ends, but to give the audience closure they no longer even want, Melville decides to have Pierre gun down his ex-fiancée's ex, at which point he gets carted off to jail. The ex-fiancée keels over once she learns of the incest, and then brother and sister poison themselves for no reason at all.

This book has no redeeming qualities. The writing is drawn out and boring, and Melville doesn't even bother to keep his sentence structures consistent. This is just an excuse to rant, but while I genuinely don't mind that, the rantings are about as sane as Mein Kampf. If Melville had mentioned a titmouse, I'd have died from laughing too hard.

Seriously, though. Worst book ever, and I've read Ethan Frome. I still gave it five stars just because something that bad deserves recognition.

Carol says

Rating this book was frustrating. It’s one of those works which, when you try to view it coherently in your mind, assault you equally with its ridiculous shortcomings and its magnificent strengths until you’re robbed of your ability to appraise its value in a straightforward way.

Pierre is a romance set in the pastoral country—a marked departure from his previous novels, such as *Typee* and *Omoo*, which were all set at sea. Indeed, when he wrote Sophie Hawthorne in the midst of the project, he promised that his next work would be a “rural bowl of milk” far more appealing to feminine sensibility than the “bowl[s] of salt water” he’d sent her before. The recent commercial and critical failure of his last book,

Moby Dick, no doubt played a hand in his intentions for Pierre. He informed his publishers that the next book would be “calculated for popularity... being a regular romance, with a mysterious plot to it, and stirring passions.” That this pragmatic plan failed spectacularly doesn’t necessarily tell on the quality of the novel, but it certainly left a lasting mark: the book shows signs of a wild struggle between the author’s desire for artistic integrity on one hand, and popular acclaim on the other.

The book begins as a Gothic parody, following the troubles of Pierre Glendinning, the 19-year-old heir of Saddle Meadows. Chapter after chapter, Melville unrolls countless shopworn tropes for the delectation of his imaginary female readership—the Hidden Stain Upon the Family Honor! The Secret Family Member! The Heir’s Disownment! But all this is told in florid, overwrought language so rococo and bizarre that it elevates the story to some literary purgatory beyond mere cliché. The writing is too strange to take itself seriously and too choked with clashing metaphors to rise above the level of parody—it occupies a self-mocking, self-loathing space that refuses to fully commit to one or the other. Yet at its best, the book occasionally gives us passages that resound with strange beauty:

> Love sees ten million fathoms down, till dazzled by the floor of pearls. The eye is Love's own magic glass, where all things that are not of earth, glide in supernatural light. There are not so many fishes in the sea, as there are sweet images in lovers' eyes. In those miraculous translucencies swim the strange eye-fish with wings, that sometimes leap out, instinct with joy; moist fish-wings wet the lover's cheek.

Melville also subverts another popular trope—the inviolable sacredness of family—with an incest theme that infiltrates all the plot threads. At various points, Pierre engages in flirtations with three family members, including a male one. At one point he tries to make his real love interest into a cousin. Love in *Pierre* is not soft or quiet—it’s a virulent contagion, the sheer power of which explodes boundaries painfully and ecstatically. Melville’s literary excesses reverse the ordinary, build it over new: he makes our eyes swim with strange fish, fills the sea with swimming eyes.

Then, around the half-way point of the book, something stranger happens: Melville decides that he wanted to write a different kind of book. The novel belatedly informs us that Pierre is a well-known literary celebrity, and we’re treated to a fascinating, acerbic disquisition on the pitfalls and caprices of literary authorship and celebrity. Particularly heartrending is the following passage, purportedly written about Pierre and his book, but which we can’t help but see as a self-reflexive musing on the book itself:

> Two books are being writ; of which the world shall only see one, and that the bungled one. The larger book, and the infinitely better, is for Pierre's own private shelf. That it is, whose unfathomable cravings drink his blood; the other only demands his ink. But circumstances have so decreed, that the one can not be composed on the paper, but only as the other is writ down in his soul.

It’s all too readily apparent that though he may have started *Pierre* with the half-hearted intention of turning it into a cash cow, the book written in his soul eventually won out and attempted to wrestle control over the latter half of the book. His lamentations about how the pursuit of truth leads our hero to be regarded with “distrust, dislike, and…fear and hate” might equally apply to him and his repeatedly unsuccessful efforts to win the plaudits of an indifferent and scornful public. Yet even that didn’t stop him from attempting the grand swing at literary greatness that this book ultimately does not achieve.

Upon finding out a family secret that puts him in a moral quandary, Pierre wedges himself under a

precariously balanced boulder called the Memnon Stone and essentially dares heaven to crush him if his decision to live in truth put him in the wrong. Although *Pierre* was something of a hybrid mess that never reaches the heights of *Moby Dick*, it’s in some ways more absorbing and moving. Though he doesn’t always succeed in his vision, in the imperfect throes of this book—and in the occasional flashes of greatness in the individual passages, which were among the best I've ever read in any book—I can see Melville wedging his body under the massive Memnon Stone each time he writes, daring the boulder to smash him (and half-expecting it to), with all the melancholy humor, existential despair, and reckless courage of a man who writes ultimately for his soul, only for his soul.

J.M. Hushour says

An unapproachable, horrendous, Ed Wood-esque disaster of a novel.
Let me start off by saying that many of the five-star reviews of this book seem to labor under the delusion that Melville wrote this "so bad it's good" on purpose, that, prompted by the bad reviews for his masterpiece "Moby-Dick" he decided to put a thumb in the eye of literary criticism by writing a crass exaggeration of popular romances of the time. There is nothing in the historical record that validates this. The extensive notes in the edition I have make clear that a disillusioned Melville intended to write a "popular" novel that would appeal to the masses, like, say, Thomas Pynchon settling down to write a young adult novel about lesbian vampires trapped in dystopian domes on Mars.
That he failed so miserably and that "Pierre" is such a fucking terrible, over-wrought, wrist-wringing, and so-bad-it-is-funny novel is more a testament to Melly's desperation than anything else. He'd hit his stride with "Dick", he was unique, had developed a curious and advanced style of prose, and trying to square the circle of himself with public, common taste could not have but ended badly.
There really is no excuse for this book. It is just bad. I usually give books half--I read half and then if it is that awful, I give up. I got through maybe a good fifth of "Pierre" before, fascinated, I spent more time reading about what spawned this atrocity.
Avoid. Read his other, fantastic novels.

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

[He certainly did! (hide spoiler)]

John Pistelli says

What was left of Melville's early audience was killed off by the dreadful Pierre*, a year after* Moby-Dick*, and despite various modern salvage attempts,* Pierre *certainly is unreadable, in the old-fashioned sense of that now critically abused word. You just cannot get through it, unless you badly want and need to do so.*
—Harold Bloom, Introduction to *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Herman Melville*

I read Bloom's quip about *Pierre* when I was a teenager and have been making a shortened version of it about various and sundry books—"Unreadable in the old-fashioned sense: you just can't read it!"—ever since. I waited until now, though—specifically, until the publication earlier this year, for the first time, of a Norton Critical Edition—to actually read *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (1852). Its 357 pages took me about nine days: a challenge, then, but not an impossibility.

With his reference to the older meaning of "unreadable," Bloom, writing in the 1980s, was mocking then-fashionable postmodern standards of value based on Roland Barthes's distinction between "classic realist texts" that supposedly require little but passive consumption and so are merely *lisible*, or readable, and experimental or avant-garde writing that demands readerly collaboration and therefore is *scriptible*, or writeable. Bloom is correct that Melville's disastrous seventh novel will not be rescued by any kind of deconstruction (it deconstructs itself more thoroughly than any hip Reagan-era Yalie could), but to dismiss it as a bad, boring book is what Bloom might call a "weak misreading."

Pierre is not exactly a page-turner nor even the high-spirited if unorthodox romp that *Moby-Dick* is, but we should transvalue the novel's early reviewers' infamous damning judgments—"Herman Melville Crazy," "inexcusable insanity"—and learn to appreciate this parody of sentimental fiction turned lethally serious Greek tragedy, this nihilistic romance of how an everyman becomes an Ahab, this incest-obsessed kissing cousin to all the great fateful family romances, from the classic ones it invokes—the tales of the Greek Titans; *Hamlet*—to the modern ones it resembles or foreruns: *Wuthering Height*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

The story of *Pierre* is shortly told, unless you are Herman Melville, lover of *Tristram Shandy* and *Sartor Resartus* and consequently determined to write an extraordinarily verbose metafictional psychological novel that dwells for pages upon pages on mental states both minute and bizarre. Sadly, Melville believed he was writing a potboiler, a domestic sentimental gothic novel like the ones currently in fashion, whose expected popularity would make up for the decline in his book sales accompanying the fictional experiments of *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick*. While he borrowed a broad social canvas, a lurid and melodramatic plot, and a cloying tone from such novels, *Pierre* cannot cloak under anodyne middlebrow sentiment its finally nihilistic attack on family values, the American class system, the business of books, or, ultimately and as in Ahab's tragedy, the very arrangement of the cosmos.

The novel concerns Pierre Glendinning, last male heir to a distinguished New York family of Indian-killers and Revolutionary warriors; Melville does not let us forget that their wealth is built on violence.. Pierre is in his late teens as the novel begins. He lives in a bucolic and aristocratic paradise called Saddle Meadows with his stately, flirtatious mother, whom he addresses and by whom he is addressed in turn as a sibling, and he is moreover betrothed to the ethereal blonde Lucy Tartan. Melville's prose in these opening episodes is an overwhelmingly unctuous and loquacious imitation of sentimental fiction, though it betrays satirical intentions—for instance, toward the institution of the family or toward romantic love—that sentimentalists might resist:

> Wondrous fair of face, blue-eyed, and golden-haired, the bright blonde, Lucy, was arrayed in colors harmonious with the heavens. Light blue be thy perpetual color, Lucy; light blue becomes thee best—such the repeated azure counsel of Lucy Tartan's mother. On both sides, from the hedges, came to Pierre the clover bloom of Saddle Meadows, and from Lucy's mouth and cheek came the fresh fragrance of her violet young being.
>
> "Smell I the flowers, or thee?" cried Pierre.
>
> "See I lakes, or eyes?" cried Lucy, her own gazing down into his soul, as two stars gaze down into a tarn.

The Norton editors in a footnote helpfully point us toward the "tarn" of "The Fall of the House of Usher," American Romanticism's most famous Gothic tale of incest. (In fact, I detect a great deal of Poe in this novel, though critics do not seem to discuss this very much.) Of most interest to contemporary readers in the novel's rather slow opening might be the narrator's digressive refutation of American exceptionalism; such

grand lineages as that of the Glendinnings and their vast estate goes to show that the United States, Melville insists, is no less and is perhaps *more* feudal than Old Europe:

> But whatever one may think of the existence of such mighty lordships in the heart of a republic, and however we may wonder at their thus surviving, like Indian mounds, the Revolutionary flood; yet survive and exist they do, and are now owned by their present proprietors, by as good nominal title as any peasant owns his father's old hat, or any duke his great-uncle's old coronet.
>
> For all this, then, we shall not err very widely if we humbly conceive, that—should she choose to glorify herself in that inconsiderable way—our America will make out a good general case with England in this short little matter of large estates, and long pedigrees—pedigrees I mean, wherein is no flaw.

"No flaw"—which is to imply, I believe, that they are at least partially inbred. This brings us to the plot's catalyst: Pierre, visiting a sewing circle with his mother, is pierced by the glare of a strange girl. Later, he receives a letter from this girl, Isabel, wherein she claims to be his illegitimate sister and begs his aid in her poverty. Pierre gradually recalls, from fragmentary memories of family lore, that his father may have had a youthful affair with a refugee—of noble or even royal blood—from the French Revolution. He goes to the small cottage where Isabel lives, which is also the residence of a "fallen woman" named Delly, who has been the scandalous topic of conversation between Pierre's righteous mother and the weak, effeminate minister, Rev. Falsgrave (i.e., one whose counsel about death is false).

Isabel, who has the otherworldly and slightly inhuman air of one raised in the wild or in isolation (like Caspar Hauser, alluded to in the novel in a different context), narrates her early life of orphaned wandering; because she does not know the common names for things and because her hold on reality is tenuous, she describes the settings of her childhood, from ships to asylums, in highly defamiliarizing and disorienting terms:

> "Scarce know I at any time whether I tell you real things, or the unrealest dreams. Always in me, the solidest things melt into dreams, and dreams into solidities. Never have I wholly recovered from the effects of my strange early life. This it is, that even now—this moment—surrounds thy visible form, my brother, with a mysterious mistiness; so that a second face, and a third face, and a fourth face peep at me from within thy own."

Her eerie recounting of how she came to self-consciousness suggests that individual identity is a fall from grace, an isolation within the fragile flesh of the human, which intimation the rest of the novel bears out:

> "Now I began to feel strange differences. When I saw a snake trailing through the grass, and darting out the fire-fork from its mouth, I said to myself, That thing is not human, but I am human. When the lightning flashed, and split some beautiful tree, and left it to rot from all its greenness, I said, That lightning is not human, but I am human. And so with all other things. I can not speak coherently here; but somehow I felt that all good, harmless men and women were human things, placed at cross-purposes, in a world of snakes and lightnings, in a world of horrible and inscrutable inhumanities."

I have not even mentioned the "mystic guitar" she uses to communicate with Pierre; like Coleridge's "damsel with a dulcimer," this dark-eyed, dark-haired mystery woman signifies the mute enigma underlying Romantic art, as well as, if we are in the Jungian mood I have been in this month, the male Romantic artist's anima, the internal and eternal feminine drawing him on toward the ideal.

Pierre determines that he must not turn away from the challenge posed by Isabel, not even for the sake of his worldly reputation or success. Reflecting that if he were to acknowledge his sister, he would bring disgrace to his family (by implicitly accusing his dead father, upon whose portrait Pierre often meditates in his chamber, of adultery) as well as to Lucy, Pierre decides to pretend he has married Isabel, thus preventing the truth about his family from coming out. But his haughty mother is obviously unaware that Isabel may be of the potentially royal bloodline of usurped European monarchs, not to mention the possible descendent of her own husband; Mrs. Glendinning believes that Pierre is "[m]ixing the choicest wine with filthy water from the plebeian pool" and so she disowns him. Pierre then absconds to New York City with both Isabel and Delly. That Pierre and Isabel harbor more than familial feelings for each other is implied as decisively as Victorian standards would allow:

> He held her tremblingly; she bent over toward him; his mouth wet her ear; he whispered it.
>
> The girl moved not; was done with all her tremblings; leaned closer to him, with an inexpressible strangeness of an intense love, new and inexplicable. Over the face of Pierre there shot a terrible self-revelation; he imprinted repeated burning kisses upon her; pressed hard her hand; would not let go her sweet and awful passiveness.
>
> Then they changed; they coiled together, and entangledly stood mute.

In New York, Pierre is disowned as well by his wealthy man-about-town cousin and is therefore forced to take up residence in an old church turned bohemian flop-house, which allows Melville to spend amusing pages mocking the hipster fashions of the period, including the congeries of lifestyle radicalisms surrounding Transcendentalism and the philosophical vanguards marching under the banner of German idealism.

Pierre, we are also told in the novel's most famous instance of Melville's indifference to the reader, is a successful writer and determines to live by his pen now that he has marred his aristocratic fortunes. Abandoning the plot, Melville takes to a savage satire of the mercenary book trade and the destructiveness of its bottom-line philistinism to literature. Considering Melville's own fate—*Pierre* would mark the end of his authorial success, and he would not receive his due recognition until a generation after his death—this satire is sad as well as funny, and doubly sad in that 170 or so years has not dimmed its relevance. It is, though, quite a digression from the story and accounts, as much as does the novel's psychological focus and stylistic bombast, for its "unreadable" reputation.

Pierre now embarks on a masterwork, though he is scarcely twenty, and Melville makes clear through a set of allusions to the defeated mythological Giant Enceladus that the young man's heroic effort to challenge the gods is a noble but doomed one. Pierre's literary aspirations, like his discovery of Isabel, stand for the goad toward absolute and supra-mundane values that every great or even potentially great human being experiences. Just so we do not miss this Ahab-theme of the heroic, perverse quest, Lucy re-enters the novel almost at its ending, supernally determined to live with Pierre and Isabel and to serve them, this based solely on her intuition that they need her, even though she has no actual knowledge of their own relationship nor why Pierre abandoned her in the first place.

I will not give away the novel's ending except to say that, as you might expect, this unorthodox arrangement ends badly for all involved, and rather thrillingly—guns! prison! poison!—for a novel that moves as slowly as *Pierre* does.

Pierre is a domestic, sexual *Moby-Dick*; it shows that you do not need to be at sea to find yourself shipwrecked on your own reckless journey toward the reality you intuit behind reality. The incest of long-separated siblings provides a persuasive double (or *ambiguous*) symbol for such a narrative because it both

derogates the secular world as an affair of self-involved material interrelation even as it shows true relation to be based on a secret and fated pattern of affinity. For Pierre, incest, like authorship, is an earthly evil and burden while also being a sublime, heavenly vocation.

Should we obey the divine call we sometimes hear or think we hear, no matter how seemingly insane its demand? (An essay idea for any idling student who should chance by: compare and contrast *Pierre* with the nearly contemporaneous *Fear and Trembling*.) Should we marry our siblings or go broke trying to write great literature no one wants to read? Only, the novel implies, if we are willing to accept that this world will be against us in every way.

During the carriage ride into the city, Pierre finds part of a philosophical pamphlet written by one Plotinus Plinlimmon, likely a satire on Emerson, about whom Melville was ambivalent. In the pamphlet, Plinlimmon develops an ingenious analogy between two types of time-keeping devices and two types of people: chronometers—that is, those clocks who keep Greenwich time on shipboard in every latitude—and horologes—which is to say, clocks and watches attuned to local time. Among human beings, chronometers are the saints and prophets, keeping heaven's time on earth; but most people cannot be saints and prophets and must content themselves—amid the exigencies of work and family and all the rest—with living merely earthly lives and keeping merely earthly time. Melville tells us that Pierre does not understand this pamphlet because it hits too close to home; the implication is that Pierre might have been better to wind his watch and live out his normal life rather than undertake his catastrophic erotic and literary adventure. Melville's own sorrowful second thoughts about his literary life and its inexorable decline must also be intimated here.

Elsewhere in the novel, Melville goes further than Plinlimmon's accommodationist philosophy when he shows Pierre's long, sleepless striving for the truth about his conflicting duties to Isabel and to convention to terminate not in certainty but in confusion, in the ambiguities of the novel's great subtitle:

> In those Hyperborean regions, to which enthusiastic Truth, and Earnestness, and Independence, will invariably lead a mind fitted by nature for profound and fearless thought, all objects are seen in a dubious, uncertain, and refracting light. Viewed through that rarefied atmosphere the most immemorially admitted maxims of men begin to slide and fluctuate, and finally become wholly inverted; the very heavens themselves being not innocent of producing this confounding effect, since it is mostly in the heavens themselves that these wonderful mirages are exhibited.
>
> But the example of many minds forever lost, like undiscoverable Arctic explorers, amid those treacherous regions, warns us entirely away from them; and we learn that it is not for man to follow the trail of truth too far, since by so doing he entirely loses the directing compass of his mind; for arrived at the Pole, to whose barrenness only it points, there, the needle indifferently respects all points of the horizon alike.

"Hyperborean" will be Nietzsche's word, in *The Antichrist*, for his bold philosophical peers, and much in *Pierre* hints at the coming world of Nietzsche, Kafka, and Beckett—a world where the truth-seeker simply has to learn to live amid total privation and total confusion. Of Plinlimmon's pamphlet, Melville comments, "For to me it seems more the excellently illustrated re-statement of a problem, than the solution of the problem itself"—a description of *Pierre* itself, perhaps of all modern art, perhaps of all *great* art insofar as great art, whatever its epoch, is eternally modern in being perpetually problematic, or *ambiguous*.

Pierre, like the fanciful half-buried torso of Enceladus in Mt. Greylock (the novel's absurd dedicatee) that is Melville's emblem for his hero's tragic literary venture, is halfway between Romantic energy and modernist enervation. It savors as much of Emerson as of Nietzsche, of Shelley as of Kafka, of Blake as of Beckett, which means that it never entirely abandons an endorsement of intellectual, literary, and personal heroism,

even though it knows such heroism will inevitably be crushed by the mundane world of law, family, custom, and commerce.

That the novel fails on every level is written into the novel: failure is its sublime. To fail you first must strive, though, and the exhortation to strive, rather than the passive wallowing in failure that I sometimes find tiresome in modernism, is what I take from this extraordinarily weird and, yes, occasionally unreadable novel. That is why, despite its faults, I recommend that you read it too.

Julia says

OHMYGODIHATETHISBOOK

Ashley says

there's no getting around it, melville's mastery of language is up there with shakespeare, faulkner, and woolf. it's the kind of language that draws so much attention to itself that, at times, you stop reading for the plot and start reading for the texture of the sentences themselves.

pierre is not so much a story, or a novel, as it is a wildly incoherent narrative progression that, at each stage, seems to turn a corner. the plot certainly turns corners that prove to be irrevocable, as characters make decisions that, as in greek tragedy or shakespeare, inevitably push the action toward a train wreck. but, then, violating even the boundaries of the world the novel set out at the beginning, the story turns and turns in unimaginable directions.

as a story, then, it isn't very cohesive. but as a study of human nature, as bizarre and seeming unreal as it is, melville does seem to get at some of the basic conflicts of human desire, and he certainly plumbs experience to find all of its ambiguities. this is a novel that is both outside the boundaries of normal anything---normal writing, normal experience, normal expectation---and which is also about those kinds of experiences and sensations that seem to be detached from or not easily placeable in the organization of what we accept as normality. he begins by setting out a story that would seem to be traditionally sentimental, and he ends up somewhere entirely different---in uncharted waters.

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

Do beware this edition, this "Kraken" edition ; the one with the Sendak illustrations, ed'd by Parker, the same Parker who participated in the NN edition, Pierre, or The Ambiguities: Volume Seven, Scholarly Edition, which is probably the one to get. The "Kraken"/Sendak edition should be thought of as the Expurgated Edition ; not the 'restored' edition ;; unless of course there's some kind of documentation. It might just be Parker's fantasy. I don't know I'll have to look into it. But if you want the text that Melville *actually* intended, the one published, read the NN edition.

It might be the case (I'll have to look into this) that this "Kraken" edition is the kind of pop=lit Melville at

first set out to write ;; but what got published was his --> I'll write whatever the f*** I want and f*** you pop=lit readers. Etc. And the book didn't sell ; all too familiar.

Fernando says

Herman Melville es uno de mis escritores favoritos. “Moby Dick” es mi libro preferido y más allá de haber leído mucho y a muchos, ningún libro llega a superar el efecto de admiración que ese libro logró en mí y que sigue teniendo. El libro de la ballena blanca fue escrito en 1851 y “Pierre, o las ambigüedades” en 1852. Cuesta creer que haya un cambio tan radical entre la prosa del primero y el estilo narrativo del segundo aunque tal vez, todo este devaneo de Pierre a lo largo de cuatrocientas páginas tenga que ver con ese bajón anímico que experimentó a partir del revés comercial y literario que le provocó el fracaso de la publicación de “Moby Dick”, a punto tal de que evaluó dejar las letras para siempre, pero se repuso y siguió escribiendo hasta el final de sus días, que transcurrieron trabajando como un gris empleado de Aduana.
Atrás habían quedado sus jóvenes años navegando en barcos balleneros, dando la vuelta al mundo, pero también y más allá de su motivación por escribir, sus muy pocas alegrías editoriales las cuales, por suerte fueron reconocidas y revalidadas años más tarde, poniéndolo en un lugar merecido en las letras universales.
Yendo a Pierre, debo reconocer que no se parece en nada a lo que he leído de Melville. Es probable que el autor haya querido imprimirle un tenor distinto a la epopeya que había escrito justo un año anterior y buscó ahondar en otras aguas: la de la psicología humana.
Para esto se valió de una prosa puntillosa, compleja y preciosista con fuertes características propias del Romanticismo de la primera época (sobre todo al inicio de la novela), especialmente del “Sturm und Drang” propugnado por Goethe y Schiller.
Adentrado ya en la novela, la técnica narrativa de que utiliza Melville toma elementos de la tragedia griega, mientras que los diálogos son, por momentos, de un estilo muy aproximado a Shakespeare. A las tragedias de Shakespeare y no a las comedias. Este libro no tiene ningún aspecto divertido o entretenido para destacar. Las narración se torna densa, pesada. Para ser más claro, es a partir de las últimas cien páginas en donde se desarrolla la acción más interesante. Melville necesita veinte páginas para explicar algo que se podría reducir a unas cuantas líneas y la lectura se torna tediosa, monótona y aburrida. Hay descripciones extremadamente detalladas de formas de pensar, de situaciones, de historias de vida, de personajes secundarios que desvían la atención del lector y se nota que tanto divague hizo que Melville se desviara de la historia que tenía pensada para Pierre adornándola de muchos elementos superfluos, algo de lo que también adolecía su gran amigo, el gran escritor Nathaniel Hawthorne, a quien Melville le dedicara “Moby Dick”.
Mucho se ha hablado de la relación de estos dos escritores, aunque los biógrafos han apuntado más a Melville, poniendo en duda su “hombría”. Muchos creen ver en Melville que más allá de su matrimonio de toda la vida con Mary Gasenvoort fuertes rasgos homosexuales y esto puede notarse en novelas como “Redburn”, “Billy Budd” y sendos pasajes entre Ishmael y Queequeg en “Moby Dick” y vuelve a apreciarse en algunos momentos de Pierre, quien al principio tiene todas las características de afeminamiento para sufrir una transformación radical hacia el final de la historia.
Los primeros tres cuartos del libro son un largo devaneo histérico y existencial de Pierre, un muchacho refinado y de alta sociedad que vive con su madre viuda a quien, por su aspecto juvenil más allá de bordear los 50 años, llama "hermana".
Se roza el incesto de forma casi directa: la madre de Pierre sostiene al principio de la novela que sólo puede mostrarse ante su hijo (o su “hermano”), perfectamente maquillada y portando sus mejores vestidos. Vestidos que el propio Pierre se encarga de ponerle.
Por supuesto, también hay en la novela una frágil muchacha rubia llamada Lucy Tartan. Su relación con esta chica pasará a ser de idílica, romántica y eufórica a distante, compleja y sufrida a partir de un acontecimiento que cambiará de rumbo toda su existencia: la aparición de una hermana que su admiradísimo e intachable

padre ha tenido en una relación extra matrimonial. Esa mujer se llama Isabel Banford y pasará a regular su vida. Las cosas van a cambiar drásticamente (dentro de todo el prolegómeno que Melville se toma para ello) y para empeorar las cosas, en la confusión que Pierre tiene en su cabeza, le llevará a tomar una insólita decisión, la cual no voy a revelar para no hacer spoiler, pero que tiene que ver directamente con el desenlace de la historia.
Herman Melville no va a dejar de ser uno de mis escritores preferidos a causa de este libro ya que he leído casi la totalidad de su obra y varias de sus novelas son notables, además de los cuentos cortos de gran elaboración y de ese personaje tan kafkiano que anticiparían a tantos del genial autor checo. Me refiero a Bartleby, el escribiente.
Con respecto a Pierre, siento que el agotamiento mental que Melville sufrió luego de todo el año que le llevó el proceso creativo de Moby Dick lo dejó en un cenagal que le enturbió el objetivo que tenía para Pierre. Tal vez, ideó esta obra de una manera más simple, pero al intentar darle ciertas características demasiado rebuscadas, cayó en sus propias ambigüedades.

BAM The Bibliomaniac says

This book reminds me of Of Human Bondage, except not as well written.
This was my introduction to Melville. I didn't think I could deal with the whale (that's what she said) so I attempted this. And I felt for the characters. Except Isabelle. She was a conniver. But I didnt appreciate the writing style. It bogged things down for me. I would have enjoyed the story so much more had it need plain speech.

Kirk says

I like to think of this as the *Metal Machine Music* of American literature. It's a crazy, baffling, totally alienating renunciation of readers of the 19th-century popular marketplace that mixes filial bile, Gothic satire, philosophical essay, and tantalizing hints of impropriety (threesome!) with some of the most gorgeous prose ever to not make a lick of sense. In other words, if you thought *Moby-Dick* was a digressive mindbender, this "kraken" as HM called it (the kraken being a sea beast even scarier than the Dick) is way more challenging. So incomprehensible was the narrative that one reviewer's headline declared "Herman Meville Crazy." That's my second favorite succinct review right after a certain somebodylicious on GR said "[Yours Truly:] is Fucked in the Head." (I'm not, just for the record). If I'd been alive back in 1852 my review would have read in its entirely: "Methinks Herman Melville Has Been Smokin Too Much Kraken."

A few slobservations: there's controversy over which edition to read. I bow to Hershel Parker, but I prefer this edition to his, which does away with some of the more digressive allegorizing on authorship. Also, there was an interesting film version of this about 10 years ago called *Pola X* starring the late Guillame Depardieu. Check it out, but only as an adjunct to the experience of the prose. That the French think this book is better than *Moby-Dick* is its own endorsement. I also wish some indie band would call itself "Plotinus Plinlimmon" after the batshit philosopher behind "Chronometricals and Horologicals," the treatise on moral relativism that ignites Pierre's rebellion from conventional mores. Plotinus Plinlimmon is at least as good a band name as Duran Duran (or Steely Dan---sorry, Jackie Blue). Finally, the ending---spoiler alert---has always reminded of Lucy and Ethel's famous sitcom performance of Shakespeare. And I say that with a straightface. It's a humdinger that's *so* over the top you seriously do wonder if the entire book was a hoax. That it wasn't makes for great pathos.

Jesse says

I know that I'll sound like I'm swiping at a giant for the thrill of it, but when I read *Pierre* I thought that a lot of Melville's prose was just terrible. Reading *Moby Dick* a bit later on and becoming acquainted with Melville's sensibility in a more palatable setting helped me to better understand the encounter. At the time, though, *Pierre* was that rare book that enslaved me as a reader despite its prose.

What kept the pages turning was the sense that something was "off" about the whole project. Within a few chapters: What the hell is with Pierre? Reading on: What the hell is with Melville? On completion of the novel: What the hell did I just read? A year has passed and I still get excited when I think about this book. I have the "Kraken Edition" with Sendak illustrations waiting on my shelf and I can't wait to read it.

Jim Leckband says

Doubtless, it was something that I had read, perhaps in a tome that undeservedly had washed ashore into a rag shop or in a circular that passed through my undeserved hands, as I say, it may have been something that I read that still occurs to my head even unto this day, this day of ambiguities, this day of uncertainties, this day of a certain *je ne sais quoi* aura, this day that I careened to the end of a "novel", that I vaguely remembered a choice morsel of an anecdote, or really, a warning even, that the substance of which, I cradled in my heart, I nestled in my head, and coddled in my bosom, the substance evoking dreams, notions and urges that I must relate so that others that may trod the paths I have with this novel can have what I did not, and might take this tidbit of what I remember and use it for their benefit and seriously take the matter in hand before embarking on roads that have no highway sign, roads that may end like many roads end, in a place quite different in aspect than their unassuming beginning, as I say, this nugget of wisdom that I have carried with me from that fogged palimpsest of a pamphlet, I must at once remind any prospective readers, to wit: If a reader needs to read a sentence three or four times to make any sense, then maybe the author hasn't quite worked out what he wants to say.

When I was reading "Pierre", I thought, "Melville is writing this atrociously for a reason." Obviously he is parodying or satirizing but the joke is mostly lost on us folks one hundred and fifty years or so later. Some say this is a masterpiece but it just goes on and on and on and to try to disentangle his ambiguities leaves the reader in a quandary: accept the ambiguities as a necessity to make his point and be perpetually perplexed OR try to unravel them and fall into Melville's trap. AAAGGHHHH!!!

I'm giving it two stars because sometimes it was hilarious. If he could have calmed down and really edited it he could have made a great book. Right now it has a tinge of Kerouac's overblownitude mixed with Hawthorne's savagery.

Kaya says

> "Oh, Lord! that fat men should be so thin-skinned, and suffer in pure sympathy on others' account. A thin-skinned thin man, he don't suffer so, because there ain't so much stuff in him

for his thin skin to cover."

SPOILERS FOLLOW!!!!
Ok. MAN! Having finished about 12 hours ago my response to the ending is DOUBLEYOU TEE EFF!!!

Where did the Pierre Jonestown Massacre come from??? WHY? HUH??????? I am so baffled. I think I am let down? Cuz I freaking LOVED reading this book and the second half sure picked up steam.

Was there a LOT of sex or was there none? They had to be doing it right? Whenever a scene faded out and P and either L or I was in the room then they HAD to be effin, RIGHT??? I don't know! It's so ....ambiguous! I loved the rivalry with Glen but I thought the ending felt like such a quick wrapup given how LONG the book is. No words are ever spared on anything but then the ending is, "And by the way, Lucy has a brother (blame that on lack of word processors back then) and by the way, Pierre is gonna Kill Glen??? I wanted a more satisfying avenging! I wanted a return to Saddle Meadows! I mean, Glen's snubbing of Pierre was harsh (I loved that scene) but worthy of murder? Am I missing something else? I wanted more Plinlimmon!

And the allusion at the end to Isabel not actually being Pierre's sister? What's up?? What did the paintings prove or disprove? And if she isn't actually his sister, all the more reason for celebration! Pierre can have a harem! Why didn't Lucy's bro and Glen rat Lucy out to Isabel when they came to the door at the Apostles? I know Isabel always suspected there was something between Lucy and Pierre but I guess it had to be kept...ambiguous!

But my opinion of ending is totally diff from that of the book as a whole. Melville's writing totally speaks to my soul! There's this passage about how the soul or body might already know or feel something that the brain hasn't yet processed. "Death is like this." I love it! That's how I feel about his writing - putting into words these abstract thoughts and ideas that were astir in me yet never spoken! And he is SO FUNNY! I love all the crazy words that he must have made up - like povertyishness or whatever that one was.

Why are they all so unhappy at the end? I just did not see that coming?! Why didn't Pierre-a-tois just up and move to a diff. town? OR, I thought Lucy and Glen would marry, he'd croak/ have an "unfortunate incident" and she'd inherit Saddle Meadows back and welcome Pierre back! Wahhhh! This is one of those books I really woulda liked to have a college professor wiz leading a discussion over.

There were so many passages that just SPARKLED. Ones that'd make me just stop and smile. Just like Moby-Dick - a paragraph alone could sustain me for so long like a nice big egg breakfast made by Seth - that it did end up taking me a really long time to read. (Though the last 200 pages kinda started flying cuz I was HOOKED).

I didn't love the ending but I loved the book. A world that lets Melville die impoverished is most cruel.

David says

Five stars for weirdness, audacity, and being about 110 years ahead of its time. Or more. It's also kind of all over the place, parodying a now-dead style, moving from frothy happy frolicsome outings to madness and

murder and suicide. It's a wild and delightful ride, though.

The funny thing is that there have been quite a few attempts at a film version of Moby-Dick, and they tend to be pretty poor. So much of that novel is *not* the plot but the musings and ruminations and riffs, all of which are lost in the translation to screen. But this, oh heavens would Pierre make a great movie. It would take a brave director and some very careful casting but this could be cinematic gold, shocking and disturbing even now 160 years later. Come on someone, make the film Pierre!

(PT Anderson directing Jessica Chastain (Lucy) and maybe Julianne Moore (Mrs Glendinning) would be a good start. Suggestions for Pierre and Isabel?)

There's a French version already, I learned from another Goodreads review. So excited!

Carax's _Pola X_ is the French version. Modern update. Weird, awesome, flawed, awesome. Explicit. Be warned.
