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The Problem of Home and Family in the Works of Herman Melville

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Abstract. This article is devoted to the study of the bachelor lifestyle in the works of Herman Melville. The aim of the research is to prove that Melville uses the image of bachelors to highlight key qualities of the American mentality, such as independence, self-sufficiency, and enterprise, which, in a bachelor's lifestyle, i.e., egocentric and unrestricted by any boundaries, turn into destructive flaws. The purpose is to examine in detail the concepts of “home” and “family”, as they are significantly modified in the “bachelor” model of behavior. “Home” is understood as a special bachelor space such as a house, a family estate, an office, or a ship. The ambivalent nature of the bachelor's home is discussed. On the one hand, it is separated from the rest of the space, which still poses a danger to the individual in the context of the undeveloped American environment. On the other hand, bachelors, isolated from life, shut themselves off in an artificial environment and thus cut themselves off from reality. The issue of “family” examines the relationships of bachelors with women. The main problem is the overwhelming gap between the sexes, as well as the unwillingness to compromise and adapt to a joint family life. The result is childlessness and a loss of continuity, and on a more global level, a break in the connection between the past, present, and future.

Keywords: Melville, American romanticism, bachelor, bachelor life, American home, American family

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Проблема дома и семьи в творчестве Германа Мелвилла

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Аннотация. Цель исследования – попытка доказать, что в образе холостяков Мелвилл выводит ключевые качества американского менталитета: независимость, самодостаточность, предприимчивость, которые при холостяцком, то есть эгоцентричном и не ограниченном какими-либо рамками, образе жизни превращаются в разрушительные недостатки. Задача – подробно рассмотреть понятия «дом» и «семья», поскольку в «холостяцкой» модели поведения они существенно видоизменяются. Под «домом» понимается особенное холостяцкое пространство – фамильная усадьба, контора, корабль. Ставится вопрос об амбивалентном характере холостяцкого дома. С одной стороны, он отгорожен от остального пространства, все еще представляющего опасность для индивида в условиях не до конца освоенной американской среды. С другой стороны, оторванные от жизни холостяки замыкаются в искусственной среде и таким образом отрешаются от действительности. В вопросе о «семье» рассматриваются отношения холостяков с женщинами. Главная проблема – непреодолимый разрыв с противоположным полом, нежелание уступать и приспосабливаться к совместной семейной жизни. Как результат – бездетность и утрата преемственности, а на более глобальном уровне – обрыв связи между прошлым, настоящим и будущим.

Ключевые слова: Мелвилл, американский романтизм, холостяк, холостяцкая жизнь, американский дом, американская семья

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Introduction

Researchers of Melville's work have repeatedly drawn attention to the predominance of male characters in his prose: it has been said that Melville's works are beyond the realm of female interests, that they describe the point of view of only half of humanity, and that the author himself was thus declared a misogynist (Schultz, Springer, 2006, p. 7). In his works, Melville often emphasized the bachelor lifestyle led by his characters. For example, the sailors in the novels *White-Jacket; or The World in a Man-of-War* and *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile* are

bachelors, as are the passengers on the steamer *Fidèle* in the novel *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (one of them is even called *Missouri bachelor*). In the novel *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, the former Church of the Apostles is inhabited by bachelors; Pierre himself, thanks to his ambiguous position, leads both a married and a bachelor life (Bertolini, 1996, p. 722); the main difference between the two portraits of his father is that in the first, the father is depicted as a lively young bachelor, not yet tied down by marriage, while in the second, he is a middle-aged married man. In the novel *Moby Dick*, the *Pequod* meets the Nantucket ship called the *Bachelor* on its voyage; Captain Delano's ship from the novella *Benito Cereno* is called *Bachelor's Delight*. Finally, the characters in the short stories *The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids*, *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, *Jimmy Rose*, and *The Piazza* also have neither wives nor children.

Bachelorhood provides Melville's heroes with the opportunity for (self-) discovery and self-realization. Unburdened by family life, a man is full of potential: he can experiment, set goals, or push moral, cultural, and geographical boundaries. Free from marital obligations, the bachelors in Melville's sea novels throw merry drinking parties surrounded by local beauties and arrange extravagant feasts for their friends (*The Paradise of Bachelors...*, *Jimmy Rose*). They are capable of dubious, risky ventures: "pirate" captures of enemy ships (*Israel Potter*), journeys to the "land of fairies" (*The Piazza*), or commercial operations conducted on a "grand scale"¹. Free to move around, bachelors can travel and thereby expand their sphere of influence, which means an influx of new customers and investments for entrepreneurs (*The Confidence-Man*), bountiful hauls for whaling crews (*Moby Dick*), new independent territories for the military (*Israel Potter*). Finally, for philosophers "disgusted with the carking cares of earth" such as Ishmael and White Jacket, travel is a way of knowing the world ("being left completely to myself at such a thought-engendering altitude"²).

In this work, "bachelors" refers to unmarried characters in novels, novellas, and short stories: The Missouri man (*The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*), Paul Jones (*Israel Potter*), Jack Chase and White-Jacket (*White-Jacket*), lawyers (*Paradise for Bachelors*), Jimmy Rose, the narrator from the short story *The Piazza*. With some exceptions, we believe it is possible to add Pierre (*Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*), Captain Ahab (*Moby Dick*), and the narrator from the novella *I and My Chimney* to the list of Melville's bachelors: despite their married status, they all lead solitary existences, rarely see their wives, feel no kinship, or are in direct conflict with them: Ahab exclaims, "Wife? Wife? – rather a widow with her husband alive!"³.

¹ Melville, H. (1952). *Selected Writings of Herman Melville: Complete Short Stories*, Typee [and] Billy Budd, Foretopman (p. 244). Modern Library.

² Melville, H. (1992). *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (p. 138). Everyman Paperback Classics.

³ Melville, H. (1992). *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (p. 464).

Home

In his works, Melville points to the ambivalent nature of bachelor retreats. On the one hand, Americans, who even by the mid-19th century had not been able to completely conquer the “wild” space of their country (as the author discusses, for example, in *Pierre* and *The Confidence-Man*, describing the cruel hostility between white people and Native Americans), tend to create safe shelters⁴. Therefore, we can see that trust and mutual assistance prevail in bachelor “brotherhoods”; that a close, almost family-like bond develops between team members, including junior officers and even servants and slaves; that “bounteous heart and board” unites kindred spirits (“we were a band of brothers”⁵). In the short story *The Paradise of Bachelors*, Melville describes an idyllic bachelor life, i.e., serenity, freedom, idleness, and contentment (“give the whole care-worn world the slip, and, disentangled, stand beneath the quiet cloisters of the Paradise of Bachelors”; “take your pleasure, sip your leisure, in the garden waterward”⁶). The depiction of Paradise represents a kind of shelter, a space separated from the rest of the city, where “[everything is] quite sequestered from the old city’s surrounding din; and every thing about the place being kept in most bachelor-like particularity”⁷. We see such shelters both in the image of a bachelor’s house, a family estate or plantation, and in the image of closed communities (“orders,” “brotherhoods”): a law office, a military, whaling, or passenger ships⁸.

In terms of function, a bachelor’s space is similar to a feudal castle: it defends, serves as a place for rest and entertainment, and has the essential supplies, it has everything necessary for long-term living without contact with the outside world. In his short story *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, Melville ironically depicts this desire for an isolated and independent life in the “own” territory: the copyist occupies a tiny space behind a screen and turns it into a “bachelor’s hall”, where he keeps all his personal things and even equips a dining and sleeping area. In the novel *White-Jacket*, the narrator, unable to arrange his own space on the ship, transforms his own jacket into something resembling a castle: “I had accordingly provided [white jacket] with a great variety of pockets, pantries, clothes-presses, and cupboards [...] There were, also, several unseen recesses behind the arras; insomuch, that my jacket, like an old castle, was full of winding stairs, and mysterious closets, crypts,

⁴ For more information on the dangers of the American space, see (Maksimov, 2025, pp. 248–252), and on its hostility, see (Baranova, Mashoshina, 2020, pp. 36–43).

⁵ Melville, H. (1952). *Selected Writings of Herman Melville* (p. 193).

⁶ Melville, H. (1952). *Selected Writings of Herman Melville* (p. 185).

⁷ Melville, H. (1952). *Selected Writings of Herman Melville* (p. 187).

⁸ Melville’s researchers drew attention to such bachelor “brotherhoods”, viewing them as a kind of new, alternative form of family life: using the rhetoric of domestic comfort and blood kinship, bachelors not only reproduced the structure of the family, but also ennobled the relationships between its members. In such fraternities, friendly alliance replaced kinship, and contract replaced blood ties. See (Bertolini, 1996, pp. 727–728; Franc, 2013, p. 240).

and cabinets”⁹. In this “castle”, the bachelor is the absolute sovereign and, logically, a tyrant and despot. This is indicated by the bizarre interior design and the unwillingness to change anything, even under the pressure of common sense and practicality. By increasing his possessions, the individual thereby increases his own importance, expands his influence, and affirms his own ego (I and My Chimney; “It is my box-royal; and this amphitheatre, my theatre of San Carlo”¹⁰). Any attempt to encroach on personal territory is suppressed, as we see in the example of Jimmy Rose, who almost shot his friend; or the fights between Pierre and his cousin in *The Apostles*; or *Bartleby’s* uncompromising refusal to leave the office.

On the other hand, the desire to become isolated and separated from the masses is dangerous: in his novels and short stories, Melville shows how easy it is to stray from the path of progress toward archaism if we completely reject everything material. We can mention the bell tower that became a refuge for a monstrous automated machine; or the paper factory (*Tartarus of Maids*) isolated from the rest of the world, in whose boilers the narrator saw the birth of life itself; or the numerous secret rooms hidden behind “wondrous old doors” in *White-Jacket*, *The Confidence-Man*, *Benito Cereno*, and *Moby Dick*¹¹. Furthermore, isolation naturally leads to hierarchy, which is inherently destructive and contrary to the democratic (and Puritan) values of American life. In *Moby Dick*, *White-Jacket*, *Benito Cereno*, and *The Paradise of Bachelors*, it is said that an individual who reaches the top of the social ladder condemns himself to the torments of loneliness (“since the higher the rank in a man-of-war, the less companionship”¹²; “It seemed held something indelicate, selfish, and unfraternal, to be seen taking a lonely, unparticipated glass”¹³). Finally, another danger of the closed bachelor space is the deviant relationships between its “homogeneous” inhabitants, which are expressed either in conflicts, for example, in fights that escalate to murder (in *Billy Budd*, or the chapter *The Town-Ho’s Story* from the novel *Moby Dick*), or, on the contrary, in the formation of unnatural relationships, like incestuous (*Pierre*) or homosexual (*Billy Budd*, *White-Jacket*).

Thus, the vital desire of bachelors, having settled in an isolated space, to shield themselves from the dangers of the outside world, eventually loses its practical meaning and transforms into an aristocratic (i.e., carefree, impractical, detached from “earthly” affairs) way of life. Thoreau (Franc, 2013, pp. 162–166), whose views were similar to those of Melville, criticized such luxury in his *Walden*: “However, if one designs to construct a dwelling house, it behooves him to exercise a little Yankee shrewdness, lest after all he find himself in a workhouse, a labyrinth

⁹ Melville, H. (2011). *White Jacket; or, The World in a Man-of-War* (p. 53). The Floating Press.

¹⁰ Melville, H. (1952). *Selected Writings of Herman Melville* (p. 453).

¹¹ The demonic, diabolical, and satanic dimensions in *Moby-Dick* and Melville’s other sea narratives are examined in Osipova (2020, pp. 402–414).

¹² Melville, H. (2011). *White Jacket; or, The World in a Man-of-War* (p. 296).

¹³ Melville, H. (1952). *Selected Writings of Herman Melville* (p. 192).

without a clue, a museum, an almshouse, a prison, or a splendid mausoleum instead”¹⁴. Melville himself compares such an existence to the warm bedroom that Ishmael reflects on, “one of the luxurious discomforts of the rich. For the height of this sort of deliciousness is to have nothing but the blanket between you and your snugness and the cold of the outer air”¹⁵.

Family

Melville describes the bachelor’s attitude to women in the traditions of knightly ethics and aesthetics. His heroes (Paul Jones, Pierre Glendinning, Jimmy Rose) perceive women as objects of adoration and mythologization, which is metaphorically reflected in the images of a beautiful lady, an odoriferous flower, an invoking angel, a fairy. Even for the married hero of the novella *I and My Chimney*, his wife appears to be a mythical creature (or rather, a monstrous one, gifted with witchcraft), who, by the perverse magic, “have such a very vernal young soul”. In fact, bachelors and women exist in parallel spaces: they know almost nothing about each other, they are full of secrets from each other, and they are not particularly motivated to reveal them: “So Pierre renounced all thought of ever having Isabel’s dark lantern illuminated to him. Her light was lidded, and the lid was locked”¹⁶; “Enough. Launching my yawl no more for fairy-land, I stick to the piazza”¹⁷, “When once I have got out of the Devil’s Dungeon, I shall feel [my cheeks] mending”¹⁸. The overwhelming gap between the characters is also indicated by the significant age difference between the “married bachelors” and their companions, for example, between Ahab and his wife, “a sweet, resigned girl”; between the blacksmith Perth and his “youthful, daughter-like, loving wife”; or between Jimmy Rose’s friend and his wife, who, by his own admission, was too young for him.

The refusal to start a family is associated with the quite natural desire of single people to lead a free, independent life. At the same time, the freedom afforded to bachelors deprives them of any limitations, which is why they easily fall into extravagance and cannot stop in their desire to increase, expand, and acquire. So it is no coincidence that the leitmotif of the bachelor lifestyle is plenty and excess. Let us recall, as an example, a Nuntucket ship, *the Bachelor*, which was so successful in its trade that whale oil overflowed; a fireplace, essentially a bachelor’s space inside a “family” home (Bertolini, 1996, p. 723), which the narrator compares with the size of the galaxy; the “genuine Versailles paper – the sort of paper that might

¹⁴ Thoreau, H.D. (2004). *Walden: A Fully Annotated Edition* (p. 28). Yale University Press.

¹⁵ Melville, H. (1992). *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (p. 51).

¹⁶ Melville, H. (1984). *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities. Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile. The Piazza Tales. The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade. Uncollected Prose. Billy Budd, Sailor: An Inside Narrative* (p. 169). Literary Classics of the United States.

¹⁷ Melville, H. (1952). *Selected Writings of Herman Melville* (p. 453).

¹⁸ Melville, H. (1952). *Selected Writings of Herman Melville* (p. 210).

have hung in Marie Antoinette's boudoir" in Jimmy Rose's house. Any kind of moderation is seen by bachelors as a sign of weakness and timidity, as we see in Paul Jones' argument with the pacifist sage Franklin ("Everything is lost through this shillyshallying timidity, called prudence")¹⁹; or in the dialogue between the polite and calm Confidence-Man and the hot-tempered Missourian ("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"²⁰). Although women try in every way to stop the "bachelor" desire for unlimited acquisition, for example, by limiting the influence of the fireplace, or covering "the walls with a beautiful, nice, genteel, cream-colored paper", they encounter strong resistance ("I am simply standing guard over my mossy old chimney; for it is resolved between me and my chimney, that I and my chimney will never surrender"²¹). At the same time, bachelors do not notice how gaps are forming in all other areas with their desire to acquire, improve, and ennoble some objects such as a fireplace, a piazza, or a plantation. The walls of the house are covered with moss and mold ("the original resplendence of the peacocks had been sadly dimmed on that north side of the room, owing to a small leak in the eaves, from which the rain had slowly trickled its way down the wall, clean down to the first floor"²²); worms crawl in the ivy planted on the piazza; the basement under the fireplace turns into a primeval forest; the plantation is washed away by the river. In the depths of the ships the *Pequod*, the *Neversink*, and *Poor Richard*, dangerous "zones" (for example, hatches, storage rooms, partitions) with a harmful atmosphere are formed and imperceptibly destroy the space from the inside.

Another reason why bachelors refuse to marry is their desire to remain original. Whereas family life, being a union of two individuals who are dissimilar in age, physical, and spiritual qualities, requires necessary transformation and adaptation to the partner (Dulina, 2020, pp. 114–131). Thus, Melville constantly points in his works to the forced metamorphosis, both physical and mental, experienced by a man who finds himself in a "female" space: in a paper mill *Tartarus of Maids*), in the company of an unfamiliar girl (*The Piazza*) or sister (*Pierre*). In all of these examples, women are characterized by qualities that are contrary to the nature of an active and energetic bachelor: factory workers resemble soulless automatons; Marianna lives in a world of lifeless shadows; Isabel with her mysterious past, stunning beauty, black flowing hair, and hypnotic gaze, resembles either a vampire or a succubus. Goneril, the heroine of an episode in the novel *The Confidence-Man*, possesses the highest concentration of repulsive "feminine" qualities: young, strongly built, and with an independent mind, she was able to divorce her husband,

¹⁹ Melville, H. (1984). *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (p. 490).

²⁰ Melville, H. (1984). *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (p. 960).

²¹ Melville, H. (1952). *Selected Writings of Herman Melville* (p. 408).

²² Melville, H. (1952). *Selected Writings of Herman Melville* (p. 243).

take their child away from him, “get such a settlement awarded upon a separation, as to make penniless the unfortunate man [...] besides, through the legal sympathy she enlisted, effecting a judicial blasting of his private reputation”²³. Thus, for bachelors, women represent a danger of annihilation, of complete loss of their individuality. Marriage is no longer a source of support and strength, but rather a bond that restricts freedom, “making one willful sacrifice of himself at the altar”. The constructive elements of marriage, such as compassion, care, or love, are viewed by bachelors as manifestations of weakness, a loss of freedom, and the humiliating position of a dependent. As the Missourian tells the Confidence-Man: “go lay down in your grave, old man, if you can’t stand of yourself. It’s a hard world for a leaner”²⁴. Even the gentle Jimmy Rose angrily rejects the help of a nurse who wants to ease his last moments (“Why will she bring me this sad old stuff? Does she take me for a pauper?”²⁵).

A common theme in Melville’s works is the problem of inheritance, in other words, the continuation of the self in someone else. Since bachelors do not have children of their own, they take on child assistants (Ginger Nut, Pip, Cupid, the boys who worked on the Missouri plantation) as an alternative, who could continue the business in the future as subordinates or companions. The bachelor’s desire in raising an “errand boy” is to accelerate the formation of the skills necessary for work (“Tell me, how put the requisite assortment of good qualities into a boy, as the assorted mince into the pie?”²⁶). At the same time, the key process of growth, i.e., gradual development based on the psychological and physiological characteristics of the child, is missed. Thus, Pip, who was timid and awkward by nature, was terrified of whales and jumped out of the whaleboat, thereby depriving the crew of profit, is rapidly and forcibly re-educated, remade into the desired “format” of a whaler, as a result of which he loses his mind. A telling example of this is the Confidence-Man argument with the hot-tempered and impatient Missourian, who, in his search for the ideal worker, managed to change thirty-five boys: “Had you but kept that thirtieth boy-been patient with his sickly virtues, cultivated them, hoed round them, why what a glorious guerdon would have been yours, when at last you should have had a St. Augustine for an ostler”²⁷. Such a “consumerist” attitude toward a servant child brings corresponding results: instead of the expected help, the “boy” becomes either a burden or a competitor.

²³ Melville, H. (1984). *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (p. 906). Researchers view Goneril as a monstrous creature with a masculine nature; her desire to eat clay, along with other strange pursuits, turns her into a monster who bewitches, hypnotizes, or devours people around her, mainly men (Schultz, Springer, 2006, pp. 199–211).

²⁴ Melville, H. (1984). *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (p. 958).

²⁵ Melville, H. (1952). *Selected Writings of Herman Melville* (p. 253).

²⁶ Melville, H. (1984). *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (p. 961).

²⁷ Melville, H. (1984). *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (p. 975).

By refusing to start a family, bachelors lose their continuity, severing the connection between past, present, and future generations. Melville demonstrates this rejection of the past through the character of Paul Jones, a Scotsman by birth and a first-generation American who dreams of severing all ties with his native Britain. Pierre Glendinning also decides to break away from his family roots by destroying his father's portrait, as well as all the relics and artifacts of his family (Henceforth, cast-out Pierre hath no paternity, and no past; and since the Future is one blank to all²⁸). The Knights Templar (*The Paradise of Bachelors*) also condemn their order to oblivion by their bachelor lifestyle ("Go view the wondrous tombs in the Temple Church; see there the rigidly-haughty forms stretched out, with crossed arm upon their stilly hearts, in everlasting and undreaming rest. Like the years before the flood, the bold Knights-Templars are no more"²⁹). Melville illustrates this loss of connection with the present and the future using the example of Jimmy Rose, who did not fit into his time with his "musty" compliments, as well as the owner of the fireplace (Bertolini, 1996, pp. 723–724), who "take(s) to oldness in things; for that cause mainly loving old Montaigne, and old cheese, and old wine; and eschewing young people, hot rolls, new books, and early potatoes and very fond of [the] old claw-footed chair, and old club-footed Deacon White"³⁰. Thus, like Hawthorne's hero Wakefield, Melville's bachelor "exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place for ever [and] may become, as it were, the Outcast of the universe"³¹.

Conclusion

As one of the characters in the novel *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* remarks, "The great men are all bachelors": indeed, the "bachelor" model of behavior allows Melville to portray key characteristics of the American national character, such as independence, autonomy, freedom, and enterprise. At the same time, this lifestyle has its weaknesses: the absence of any restraining factors and an egocentric focus on one's own comfort turn advantages into destructive flaws, whereby independence and self-sufficiency turn into loneliness and annihilation; freedom turns into excess; enterprise turns into impatience in achieving the desired profit. Isolated from the outside world, these self-centered bachelors lead an aristocratic, impractical lifestyle, detached from "earthly" concerns. Melville is skeptical of such aristocrats, or gentlemen: the ceremonial side of the bachelor gentleman, that is, elegance, good manners, gallantry, is usually a mask hiding, at least, a fraud ("polite scamp"), and at worst, the devil himself ("but who can forever resist the very Devil himself, when he comes in the guise of a gentleman, free, fine, and frank?")³².

²⁸ Melville, H. (1984). *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (p. 235).

²⁹ Melville, H. (1952). *Selected Writings of Herman Melville* (pp. 186–187).

³⁰ Melville, H. (1952). *Selected Writings of Herman Melville* (p. 386).

³¹ Hawthorne, N. (1959). *The Complete short stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (p. 80). Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday & Co.

³² Melville, H. (2011). *White Jacket; or, The World in a Man-of-War* (p. 249).

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