

THE PROBLEMS OF CREATING AN ORIGINAL WORK IN  
G. MELVILLE'S NOVEL «PIERRE, OR AMBIGUITIES»

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**Abstract:** This article examines the peculiarities of the problems of creating original work in the 1852 novel by G. Melville «Pierre, or Ambiguities». The author gives a brief overview of the reception of the novel, separately dwelling on the concept of «Writer's failure» that has developed in criticism in connection with this novel. This article is devoted to the analysis of one of Melville's key motives – the problem of understanding the concept of «Original», which allows us to outline the field of necessary further Russian-language studies of the poetics and problematics of this work, which have so far been absent in Russian literary criticism. The purpose of the article is to analyze the image of the Artist, the motive for the creation of the mystical book, and highlight and describes the characteristic features of Melville's philosophy of creativity, reflected in the artistic world of his works of the 1850s. The analysis allows us to talk about the novel as an autometatext, and also to note its genre features within the tradition of the novel about the artist.

**Keywords:** literary criticism, Melville, «Pierre, or Ambiguities», problematics, originality, autometatext, novel about the artist.

Immediately after the creation of the famous philosophical novel «Moby-Dick, or The Whale» (Moby-Dick; or, The Whale, 1851), which was based on the plot of an incredibly popular genre among American readers in the mid-19th century (adventure sea novel), Herman Melville in the novel «Pierre, or Ambiguities» (Pierre: or, the Ambiguities, 1852) refers to completely different genre landmarks – the sentimentalist, as well as the Gothic novel. The abrupt change of theme and literary patterns, the theme of incest that angered contemporaries, but most importantly, the irregularities of the style and composition of the novel created for him the fame of a «Failed» work, Melville's failure as a writer, and this point of view is still preserved in modern criticism.

In 2007, a detailed study of the novel was published in the form of a sequential reading of the text, but its authors H. Parker and B. Higgins comment mostly on the original – a short version of the text of the novel. It was released as a separate edition by Parker in 1995. [1] Melville's achievement as a writer is not the final version of the text (perceived as a failure), but only the initial idea and its partial implementation. In the Russian literary criticism of the novel «Pierre», only the works of A.N. Nikolyukin and A.M. Zverev still exist. Nikolyukin practically identifies the

characters of Pierre and Ahab with Melville himself and concludes that in «Pierre» Melville's ideological crisis is expressed, and the impossibility of fighting evil is demonstrated [2]. A.M. Zverev writes about the late Melville that this is «a problem we have not even posed» [3, p. 258]. A.M. Zverev characterizes the novels of the late period of Melville's work «Pierre» and «The Charlatan» (The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade, 1857) a priori as the least noteworthy. In another article about Melville AM. Zverev generally assesses «Pierre» as an «unsuccessful» book, although he notes in it «the boldness of the plan and the complexity of the conflicts planned, although not fully developed» [4, p. 156].

Both researchers connect the figures of Pierre and Melville directly, ignoring the figure of the narrator in this novel, whereas when addressing the problem of the narrator, it becomes clear that implicitly the novel is largely about how to write a book or, on the contrary, not to write a book, and how the process of artistic expression unfolds. This feature embeds the novel in a long series of autometatexts [5, p. 39] in the history of world literature. In the novel «Pierre», metaliterary reflection is generated not only by the clash of genre models familiar to Melville but also by the introduction of the problem of the novel about the artist into the narrative.

For the sake of his paternal sister, Isabel, born out of wedlock, the main character Pierre Glendinning, a young man from a famous rich family, renounces his wealth and marries his beloved girlfriend Lucy Tartan. He and Isabel move from the family estate of Saddle Meadows to the city, and there Pierre begins to create a «great» book. Against the background of the consistently unfolding tragic fate of Pierre, the narrator reflects on the nature of creativity, on the fate of a true Artist, and on the problem of creating a truly «original work» despite reproducible genre models. The narrator's subtle analysis of Pierre's psychology reveals the hero's unconscious attempt to sublimate the erotic attraction to Isabel along the paths of his philosophical and religious pursuits.

The main problem that torments Pierre both in his personal life and in his work is the problem of ambiguity, the elusiveness of the boundary separating sin and virtue in his perception. The problem of ambiguity is also the problem of the hero's self-identification. The theme of creativity is most clearly indicated in the final part of the novel, when Pierre becomes a writer and begins work on the «new Gospel» [6, p. 412]. Having finally undermined his physical and mental health, trying to write an «unknown masterpiece» and at the same time somehow ensure life in New York, the hero not only becomes completely desperate because of the criticism of publishers but also murdered in a state of insanity. The narrative ends with a scene in prison: Lucy falls dead after learning that Isabel, whom she believes to be Pierre's wife, is his sister, and Pierre and Isabel – a kind of new Romeo and Juliet – commit double suicide.

If «Moby Dick» was dubbed a «strange book» by contemporaries, then the release of «Pierre» was accompanied by newspaper announcements and reviews, which spoke of the insanity of the author of the novel. The headline in the New York Daily Book of September 7, 1852, read: «Herman Melville is crazy» [7, p. 436]; the Boston Post of August 4 wrote about «perhaps the most insane book in existence» (Ibid, p. 419). Etc. Venediktova writes about Melville's «communicative failure», which took shape in the form of a refusal to create prose works (both large and small forms) in the late 1850s, as about success in the long term, but even more importantly, as about Melville's subjective feeling. After all, critics attacked the same thing they praised – «An almost unbearable variety of stylistic 'challenges'» [8, p. 219], the polyphony and self-reflexivity of Melville's narrative were perceived already from Moby Dick as an important component of the author's strategy.

The experience of creating the novel «Pierre», and critical responses to it do not (contrary to popular belief) become a reason for Melville to abandon his chosen path. There are two more experimental novels ahead their way. The conflict with the readership and the environment, and financial difficulties are only one side of Melville's «Failure as success», the roots of the other are in Melville's attitude to the art world as such, in his idea of the structure of the inner world of man, his experience of cognition of the outside world and the world literary heritage, as well as, significantly, about their complex the relationship with the act of creativity. In Moby Dick, the narrator's figure is so unusual because it synthesizes the young Ishmael, the bearer of direct experience, and Ishmael as the author, retrospectively creating a mystical treatise from private history. A lot of references to the metaphorical connection of the Whale and the Book (Chapter XXXII «Cetology»), playing with various scientific and artistic registers, the introduction of dramatic chapters allows you to read the novel as an autometatext, a commentary-reflection on its creation, indicating the metaphysical aspiration of the quest, postulating the presence of what is impossible to describe and write. The novel «Pierre, or Ambiguities» clearly develops the writer's philosophy of «Moby Dick», but it is emphasized «From the opposite»: instead of a first-person narrative, a third-person narrative is proposed; instead of a maritime novel, the reader receives a novel about the green hills and back streets of New York; a source of magnetic attraction and infectious «madness», the bearer of the Mystery, tempting the «prophet» artist (Ishmael, Pierre) and giving impetus to the creation of the Book, here is not the demonic Captain Ahab, but the young defenseless seamstress Isabel.

In «Pierre», the writer is again at the center of the novel, but now he is different from Ishmael – he is not a bearer of shocking personal experience, not a survivor and therefore «Announcing», but has not yet passed his initiation – a prophet without prophecy, he decides to «Announce» a kind of apocalypse before he became a

witness. The motive of the «Resurrection» after symbolic death is directly related to the image of Ishmael as the author: «Surfacing after death»Pequod «from the funnel that carried him... into the abyss, into death itself, he is, in fact, ready to «Resurrect», return to the world of the living not only as Jonah (who found himself in the «Whale's belly») but also as a kind of new evangelist» [9, p. 282]. Pierre, meanwhile, only learns that there is a Mystery in the world, a kind of omnipotent Ambiguity. And this is his important difference from Ishmael, who not only saw the Whale up close but also became the author of the subsequent narrative in the light of the truth revealed to him. Pierre's inability to write a mature work (Book XXI will be entitled «Pierre immaturely encroaches on a mature composition») is compared by the narrator to the inability to build a temple without knowing the laws of architectural skill: «There are endless quarries of beautiful marble; but... how to build a temple? <...> The discoverer of the quarry precedes the stone carver ... the architect precedes the appearance of the temple, for the temple crowns the world» [6, p. 388]. The creation of a work is endowed with a sacred function, while the process of its creation goes to infinity. Marble (nature) and the temple (work) are separated by the distance of self-knowledge, the formation of the builder. Pierre aspires to be the one who creates his opus magnum, bypassing the preliminary stages of work. His task is to be original, to show the world something new: «I will write new Gospels for the world («I will evangelize the world anew» [10, p. 273]) and reveal to him the deepest secrets that will eclipse the Apocalypse!» [6, p. 412].

Pierre's attempt to overthrow former idols from the pedestal meets the necessary stage of preparation, to then turn to book wisdom again, but to perceive it in a new way, through the prism of his view and experience, without trying to build his idea on the shaky foundation of an unprepared consciousness for this: «Pierre ... was actually at one of the stages of transition. If one day the limit point is honestly reached («That ultimate element» [10, p. 283]), then no more books will be needed <...> He did not know that ... all of them [great books] is nothing more than a particle, compared to the hidden infinity and inexhaustibility in himself» [6, p. 428].

Thus, the narrator builds a hierarchy of experience, and points to the multi-stage nature of the ascent through the darkness to light, to cognition and comprehension of the Absolute, but Pierre does not reach the highest levels of mystical knowledge, as the narrator does not reach them either. Perhaps it is in this sense that the «Failure» of «Pierre» among the reading public is something not only external, a fact of the history of its creation, publication by Melville, and the corresponding reception, but also internal - both one of the main themes of this novel and the event of its self-reflection (realized primarily through the narrator). In other words, «Pierre» turns out to be a conscious «Failure», a novel of «Self-destruction»,

and not a novel of «Self-creation», which, in a certain sense, thanks to Ishmael and the peculiarities of his narrative, Moby Dick was.

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