

Isabel and Lucy

The Soul Parts of Pierre

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Pierre was published in 1852, one year after *Moby-Dick*. Many of Melville's contemporaries speculated that the novel must be the author's reaction to *Moby-Dick*'s failure in the market. To gain a better payment for *Pierre*, Melville convinced his British publisher that unlike *Moby-Dick*, this work was promised to cater to popular reading interests.¹ Upon learning about Melville's claim in the letter, literary critics assumed that *Pierre* belongs to the genre of "sentimental gothic novel."² The story's settings mainly include a pastoral village named Saddle Meadows and New York City. Pierre Glendinning, the protagonist, is the only male heir to the Glendinning family's property at Saddle Meadows. Mary Glendinning, the widow of Pierre's late father, who was also named Pierre, preserves herself well and looks so young for her age that the mother and the son often jokingly address each other as sister and brother. The amicable atmosphere ends with Pierre's encounter with a girl in a sewing chamber. Shortly after the encounter, the girl sends Pierre a letter in which she calls herself Isabel and claims that she is his late father's illegitimate child. In order to patronize Isabel and cover his father's immoral deeds, Pierre proposes nominal marriage to Isabel. Pierre subsequently announces his plan to marry Isabel to Mary, who is devastated by the news because she has much faith in

¹ Braswell, William. "Melville's Opinion of Pierre." *American Literature* 23, no. 2 (1951): 246. Melville wrote, "my new book..., as I believe, very much more calculated for popularity than anything you have yet published of mine – being a regular romance, with a mysterious plot to it, & stirring passions at work."

² Melville, Herman, and William C. Spengemann. *Pierre or The Ambiguities* (London: Penguin, 1996), viii. All subsequent references to this text will be cited parenthetically as page numbers.

Pierre's marriage to Lucy Tartan, a girl whose late father had been a close friend to Pierre's father and who is now Pierre's fiancée. The enraged mother immediately disowns her son and expels him from the maison. Deprived of financial sources, Pierre and Isabel move to New York with the plan of using Pierre's old connections there to get some positions. The two finally settle in an apartment through Pierre's connection with his childhood friend Charles Millthorpe and survive with meager income from Pierre's writing. With a firm belief in Pierre's decision being made for some high morals, Lucy comes to live with the two. Stanley Glendinning, Pierre's cousin who admires Lucy, takes Pierre's tragedy as his opportunity to marry Lucy. On his way to Pierre's residency, Stanley stumbles on Pierre and starts a strife, in which he is fatally shot by Pierre. When Lucy visits the jailed Pierre, she unwittingly learns from Isabel and Pierre's conversation that the two are siblings. She dies soon after; her death is presumably caused by the shock of learning about Isabel's and Pierre's sibling relationship. Following Lucy's death, Pierre and Isabel both commit suicide.

It is often suggested that Pierre's actions are primarily motivated by his erotic interest in Isabel, the girl who claims to be his half-sister soon after their first encounter in the sewing chamber. In accordance with that implication in Pierre's actions, Nathalia Wright further associates Saddle Meadows' residents with sinners who occupy different circles in the *Inferno*, with which she proposes that Pierre belongs to the circle of carnal sinners.³ Focusing on Pierre's fear of reading the part about the adultery between Francesca and Paolo illustrated in Flaxman's drawings on the *Inferno*, G. Giovannini and Dennis Berthold suggest that Pierre's fear proves a tendency to commit adultery.⁴ Carol Colclough Strickland notes Pierre's immaturity and inability to handle desires and understand the complexity of life.⁵ As for Isabel, it is often suggested that she incarnates darkness and evil,

³ Nathalia Wright, "Pierre: Herman Melville's Inferno," *American Literature* 32.2 (1960): 167, 169. doi: 10.2307/2922675.

⁴ G. Giovannini, "Melville's *Pierre* and Dante's *Inferno*," *Pmla* 64.1 (1949): 71. doi: 10.2307/459670; Dennis Berthold, *American Risorgimento: Herman Melville and the Cultural Politics of Italy* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2009), 137.

⁵ Carol Colclough Strickland, "Coherence and Ambivalence in Melville's *Pierre*," *American Literature* 48.3 (1976): 305. doi: 10.2307/2924866.

symbols of a destructive force that leads to Pierre's fall and his family tragedy.⁶ By contrast, Lucy is often associated with light, goodness, and spiritual guidance.⁷ In this essay, contrary to the popular belief that Pierre's tragedy is caused by his pursuit of sensual desires, I argue that the protagonist's actions manifest desires to explore mysteries and the awakening of his consciousness, which Melville compares with Narcissus's obsession with his reflected image and cautions against obsessing with one's own pride. I divide the essay into four sections, with the second section including two parts. In the first section, "Pierre and Isabel," I argue that Pierre's reaction upon first seeing Isabel has been mistaken as displaying erotic interest in her. I explore how his mother's accusation confuses his perception of his own reaction. The second section, "Isabel and Lucy," includes two parts: *An Examination of the Sewing Scene* and *Darkness and Lightness: a Complementary Tableau*. In this section, I elaborate on the symbolic meanings of Isabel and Lucy, with which I argue that their connection with Pierre is a metaphor for the development of his inner world. In the third section, "Narcissistic Gaze," in the light of Narcissus's tragedy I argue that Isabel incarnates Pierre's reflected image and examine what role Isabel plays in projecting Pierre's inner world. The last section is a conclusion.

Pierre and Isabel

At Mary's request, Pierre accompanies his mother in her visit to a sewing activity hosted at the house of the Miss Pennies, tenant farmers of the Glendinnings. The communal activity is held twice a month by the two religiously pious Miss Pennies with the goal of making clothes and textiles for needy families in the neighborhood. It is there that Pierre first encounters Isabel as one of the sewing maids, who sits in a relatively small group located in the peripheral area of the chamber.

Critics often argue that Pierre's relationship with Isabel is essentially sensual. Emphasizing Isabel's beauty, Berthold argues that Pierre is evidently enchanted on first seeing her.⁸ Giovannini

⁶ Charles Moorman, "Melville's *Pierre* and the Fortunate Fall," *American Literature* 25.1 (1953): 30. doi: 10.2307/2921603; Rita Gollin, "Pierre's Metamorphosis of Dante's *Inferno*," *American Literature* 39.4 (1968): 544.

⁷ Wright, 168; Gollin, 544.

⁸ Berthold, 136.

argues that the allusion to the illicit relationship between Paolo and Francesca insinuates that Pierre and Isabel similarly engage in immorality despite the fact that Pierre is affianced to Lucy.⁹ Although Charles Moorman and James Kissane dispute whether Lucy or Isabel incarnates fertility, the premise of their arguments is that Pierre's relationship to Isabel is erotic.¹⁰ Moreover, the possibility that Isabel might be Pierre's half-sister indicates that their relationship can be incestuous in the meantime. In this section, I argue that Pierre's reaction on first seeing Isabel is driven by curiosity. I also argue that Pierre's mother plays an important role in implanting the idea of infidelity in her son's mind. My analysis focuses on Pierre's encounter with Isabel in the sewing room and his inner conflicts after seeing her.

Words used in depicting Pierre's thoughts while he reflects on his encounter with Isabel consistently indicate that his obsession with her face is driven by a desire to know more. Prior to the recount of the first encounter between Pierre and Isabel, the narrator observes about Isabel's face:

The face had accosted Pierre some weeks previous to his ride with Lucy to the hills beyond Saddle Meadows; and before her arrival for the summer at the village; moreover it had accosted him in a very common and homely scene; but this enhanced the wonder. (p. 43)

The use of "accost" animates the power of Isabel's face, making it a magnet-like object drawing Pierre's attention. Combined with "wonder," it suggests nothing but the mysterious nature of the face that strongly appeals to the viewer Pierre.

The detailed description of Isabel's face further testifies to the above interpretation about Pierre's motivation:

that face of supernaturalness unreservedly meets
Pierre's. Now, wonderful loveliness, and a still
more wonderful loneliness, have with

⁹ Giovannini, 71. Giovannini notes that Flaxman's drawing on the *Inferno* "reminds [Pierre] of the book on Lancelot which led Paolo and Francesca into adultery." As for Francesca's daughter, Giovannini suggests that it forebodes Isabel's letter in which she claims to be an illegitimate child of Pierre's father.

¹⁰ Moorman, 13–30. See also James Kissane, "Imagery, Myth, and Melville's *Pierre*." *American Literature* 26.4 (1955), 566–7.

inexplicable implorings, looked up to him from
that henceforth immemorial face. (pp. 46-7)

The words used in depicting her face, “supernatural[],” “wonderful,” “inexplicable,” and “immemorial,” associate it with some mysterious nature that is beyond human comprehension. The repeated use of “wonder” or “wonderful,” which reiterates the meaning of wanting to know more, reveals that Pierre’s strong feelings are essentially powered by curiosity. To further depict the inner struggles Pierre is going through while confronting the face and completely giving in to a strong desire to know more about it, Melville writes the following:

A wild, bewildering, and incomprehensible curiosity had seized him, to know something definite of that face. To this curiosity, at the moment, he entirely surrendered himself; unable as he was to combat it, or reason with it in the slightest way. (p. 47)

It is Pierre’s mother who instills a sense of betrayal in the mind of her son, who at first is primarily wonder-driven. E.L. Grant Watson suggests that Pierre’s mother takes full responsibilities for his education. “It is she who has filled him with artificial values.”¹¹ At the end of Book I, the mother’s reflection on her success in raising Pierre reveals that she is particularly satisfied with his loyalty (pp. 19, 20).¹² I propose that just as she implants in her son artificial values which she applauds, she likewise introduces her son to the ones she deplors. In Pierre’s first encounter with Isabel, his mother is the primary source from which he draws for the enlightenment of his interest in her face. On their way back to Saddle Meadows, his mother intends to generally inquire of Pierre about his impression of the sewing room. Upon his mother’s inquiry, Pierre, who is still wondering about Isabel’s face, utters, “[m]y God, mother, did you see her then” (p. 47). Because she immediately associates her son’s inquiry with an erotic desire, the enraged mother accuses her innocent son of infidelity.

¹¹ E. L. Grant Watson, “Melville’s *Pierre*,” *The New England Quarterly* 3.2 (1930): 199, doi: 10.2307/359695.

¹² The contemplation of the mother on raising her son: “I thank heaven I sent him not to college. A noble boy, and docile. A fine, proud, loving, docile, vigorous boy. Pray God, he never becomes otherwise to me.”

Ironically, Pierre internalizes the immoral implication in his mother's accusation and mixes it up with his own thought. In the plots that immediately follow the sewing scene, Pierre's conflicting thoughts, which appear to manifest a young man's emotional dilemma, actually reveal a desire to know more, which wrestles with the fear of betraying Lucy.

I shudder at thee! The face!—the face!—forth again from thy high secrecies, oh, tree! the face steals down upon me. Mysterious girl! who art thou? by what right snatchest thou thus my deepest thoughts? Take thy thin fingers from me;—I am affianced, and not to thee. Leave me!—what share hast thou in me? Surely, thou lovest not me?—that were most miserable for thee, and me, and Lucy. (p. 41)

When Pierre has just returned from Lucy's residency after a morning ride with her in the countryside, he reflects on the books he and Lucy are going to read together in the night. Pierre's ruminations about Flaxman's drawings on the *Inferno* reflect the impact of his mother's accusation and the fear in handling his suspicion of his father's illicit relationship with a French lady. Giovannini proposes that Pierre relies on the *Inferno* for "the experiential knowledge of evil which he lacks."¹³ In other words, it is the outside sources that implant in Pierre's mind immoral ideas, but Pierre who conceives immoral thoughts on his own. The implication in Giovannini's proposal resonates with what is proposed above regarding Mary's influence on her son. Under the context of discussing Pierre's ruminations on Flaxman's drawings, Pierre knows that Paolo and Francesca committed adultery after they read the Lancelot and Guinevere romance together, which Pierre fears would affect him similarly if he reads it on that night.¹⁴ This fear reflects the impact of his mother's accusation. If his mother had not implanted the idea of infidelity in the first place, the noble and docile son would hardly associate Paolo and Francesca's adultery with his inquiry about a stranger's face.

Pierre's ruminations involve the appearance of Francesca's daughter, who did not exist in the original story about Francesca

¹³ Giovannini, 71.

¹⁴ Ibid. As Giovannini notes, Flaxman's book "reminds him of the book on Lancelot which led Paolo and Francesca into adultery."

and Paolo. As Giovannini observes, Francesca's daughter is "a vague but authoritative prospectus of an evil overtaking the hero from a past dimly known to him through his aunt Dorothea's description of the origin of his father's chair-portrait."¹⁵ The daughter is fabricated out of his suspicion of his father's immoral relationship with a French lady after he saw Isabel and realized that she resembles his father's chair-portrait. The narrator's observation, right before Pierre's flashback to his first encounter with Isabel, substantiates the above argument (p. 43). The narrator observes that Isabel's face is "vaguely historic and prophetic; backward, hinting of some irrevocable sin; forward, pointing to some inevitable ill" (p. 43).

Pierre's inquiry about his mother's impression of Isabel is driven by curiosity, which his mother falsely interprets as showing an erotic interest in the mysterious girl. His mother is the primary source implanting the idea of infidelity in Pierre, which shakes his confidence in his morals. Flaxman's drawings on Francesca and Paolo intensify Pierre's fear of committing adultery. In the meantime, upon realizing Isabel's resemblance to the chair-portrait of his father, Francesca's adulterous relationship with Paolo leads him to the speculation that his father might have had an immoral relationship with a French lady. The anxiety of committing adultery is upgraded to the fear of committing incest after Isabel claims to be his half-sister.

Isabel and Lucy

The impact of Pierre's encounter with Isabel much resembles the effect of the fruit of knowledge on Adam and Eve, who are triggered to learn more after consuming it. Pierre is similarly enticed to know more. To explore the development of Pierre's inner world, it is necessary to analyze the symbolic meanings of Isabel and Lucy, who are as closely involved in his life as his mother is. In the following section, I argue that on a deep level, Isabel's and Lucy's relationships with Pierre metaphorically reflect the development of the protagonist's consciousness. This section consists of two parts: In the first, focusing on the depiction of Isabel's primary appearance, contrary to the popular belief that the depiction of her appearance and constitution emphasizes her sensual attraction, I argue that her bodily attractiveness is a

¹⁵ Ibid, 72.

metaphor for mystery. In the second part, refuting the popular belief that Lucy and Isabel represent opposing forces, I argue for their co-existence and their complementary roles in an entity. Furthermore, I propose that Melville's innovative application of the two commonly opposite colors as parts indispensable to an entity reveals his critical thinking about conventionality.

An Examination of the Sewing Scene

The sewing scene, in which Pierre meets Isabel for the first time, takes place before Lucy joins her childless aunt to spend the summer at her house in the village of Saddle Meadows. It is recounted in a flashback shortly after Pierre went back from the morning ride with Lucy.

If the room which holds the sewing groups is a miniature of human society, the location of Isabel's group, which is by the furthest end of the room, reveals the group's social position in this miniaturized society. That is, this group is banished. To get a clear picture of the geographical location of Isabel's group in the room, it is necessary to briefly describe the internal arrangements of the room. The room is evidently a large one, in which several sewing groups are present. The sewing groups form two big crowds, one close to the entrance and the other one occupying the opposite side of the room. Isabel's group is among the small groups that are placed behind the further crowd. In other words, these sewing groups are arranged intentionally to hide the small groups.

Behind the first close, busy breast-work of young girls, are several very little stands, or circular tables, where sit small groups of twos and threes, sewing in small comparative solitudes, as it were. They would seem to be the less notable of the rural company; or else, for some cause, they have voluntarily retired into their humble banishment. Upon one of these persons engaged at the furthestmost and least conspicuous of these little stands, and close by a casement, Pierre's glance is palely fixed. (p. 46)

The impression that the small groups are banished is enhanced by visual and acoustic effects created by the light of the candles. We are told that the crowd which is in front of the small groups is illuminated "by the light of many a well-snuffed candle" (p. 46). On the one hand, the light of the candles highlights the

presence of the crowd further away; on the other hand, shadow, which exists in tandem with light, shrouds the small groups and undermines their presence. An acoustic effect is brought out by the contrast between the maidens in the further crowd, who “club[] all their bright contrasting cheeks, like a dense bed of garden tulips,” and the silent small groups “sewing in small comparative solitudes” (p. 46) It is as if while seeing these radiant cheeks, viewers hear the clubbing sounds of these cheeks being gently hit by the light.

Comparing the maidens with garden tulips suggests that like tulips, which long for sun light, the maidens in the further crowd yearn for the light, which again contrasts with those in the small groups, who “have voluntarily retired into their humble banishment” (p. 46) It seemingly suggests that to be revealed or to be veiled is a voluntary action, which is demonstrated by Isabel, who “lifts her whole marvelous countenance into the radiant candlelight” and catches Pierre’s eyes (p. 46). That said, another layer of contrast between unveiling and veiling is built on the contrast between light and shadow.

The veiled that wait to be unveiled naturally relate to the unknown or mysteries. Under the context, such words as “veil,” “banish,” and “isolate” share similarities in that they are used in depicting the small groups and indicating that they are excluded from the crowd of tulip-like maidens. If the degree of being isolated is measured by an individual’s distance to the center of light as well as the importance of the person’s occupation, Isabel is the most isolated and the ultimate mystery in the room. She is among those who “engage[] at the furthestmost and least conspicuous of these little stands, and close by a casement” (p. 46). Being placed by a casement, she is the furthestmost among the least noticeable ones in the small groups.

Isabel’s dress and constitution indicate that she incarnates mystery. Resonating with the image of shadow, which metaphorizes the banishment of the small groups, the color “dark” symbolizes the mystery incarnated by Isabel. At the sight of Isabel, her face impresses Pierre with her “dark” and “olive” complexion (p. 46). The depiction of her dress associates her presence with darkness. The darkness of the dress seems to ooze from her heart, which is checked by that velvet border (p. 46).¹⁶

¹⁶ The depiction of Isabel’s dress: “Her unadorned and modest dress is black; fitting close up to her neck, and clasping it with a plain, velvet border. To a nice perception, that velvet shows elastically; contracting and

The sewing scene features the contrast between light and dark which further creates acoustic effects, both visually and acoustically highlighting the crowd further off and simultaneously undermining the small groups. On the surface, in which light exists in tandem with shadow, another layer, in which the veiled contrasts with the unveiled, is built. Isabel's geographical location at the center of the chamber, her occupation, her dress, and constitution indicate that she is the ultimate mystery waiting to be unveiled.

Darkness and Lightness: A Complementary Tableau

Lucy Tartan is "blue-eyed," "golden-haired," and fair skinned (p. 33). She is the second child from an affluent family. Her beauty and social status drastically contrast with those of Isabel, who has "dark, olive cheek" and long black hair (p. 46). Isabel's account of her own childhood depicts a grotesque and miserable life devoid of parental cares and lack of human contacts, which indicates that she is likely to be an illegitimate child of someone. She now works to pay for her accommodations at a poor farmer's house.

Critics often suggest that Lucy and Isabel are opponents who respectively represent such opposing elements as lightness and darkness, whiteness and blackness, Angel and serpent, sterility and fertility, and so on. Berthold compares Isabel and Lucy to Pierre's "twinned dark and light lovers."¹⁷ Referring to the last scene in prison, Gollin proposes, "[w]hen Lucy and Isabel join [Pierre] they complete a tableau of embodied despair."¹⁸ She suggests that the twilight when the two visit Pierre symbolizes light's departure and night's arrival, foreboding the ending in which Pierre dies in Isabel's "incestuous entanglement."¹⁹ Wright proposes that Lucy is the angel from Heaven. She notes that the counterpart of Lucy in Divine Comedy might be a minister called Lucia, who aids the lost Dante. In a similar way, Lucy functions as "a minister to Pierre" in the second part of the book when Pierre is banished from the house.²⁰ Moorman notes that Lucy is "a prototype of sterile conventionality" and a representative of the "outwardly Eden-like Saddle Meadow,"

expanding, as though some choked, violent thing were risen up there within from the teeming region of her heart."

¹⁷ Berthold, 139.

¹⁸ Gollin, 544.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Wright, 167, 168.

which is doomed to disappear because of Lucy's sterility.²¹ Isabel, "the messenger-serpent," represents dynamics in overthrowing conventionality and bringing in new order and fertility.²² Carol Colclough Strickland and E.L. Grant Watson view Isabel's and Lucy's symbolic values as complementary, a contention which I will use in supporting my argument. Focusing on the pair of lightness and darkness, I argue that the seemingly opposing elements in fact form a complementary tableau. Furthermore, I argue that Melville's innovative suggestions about the meanings of the two colors reveal his critical thoughts on conventionality. In the discussion, I use the two pairs, lightness and darkness and whiteness and blackness, interchangeably as they refer to similar contrasts. Furthermore, I argue that Isabel and Lucy are objects that project the development of the inner world of Pierre.

Focusing on the symbolic values of Lucy's name and the image of marble, Strickland suggests that such coexistences as that of the stone's white part and its dark vines refer to a balance universally existing in life force, which she further suggests that Pierre fails to comprehend.²³ She notes that Lucy, whose name "suggests 'lucid'," is "ethereal" and "sexless," and "associated with everything light, bright, and angelical."²⁴ Her meetings with Pierre often take place in day time and mild summer. By contrast, Isabel is "sensual" and "dark," and "associated with...the bitter winter, the dark night."²⁵ Associating the comparison of Lucy and Isabel with the image of marble, Strickland proposes that Lucy and Isabel respectively represent its white part and dark vines. For example, the last scene, in which Isabel embraces Pierre with her black hair covering his corpse, is reminiscent of the image of a white marble with dark streaks (p. 362).²⁶ The "purest" marble, which has "traces of other minerals," resonates with the implication in the name Lucy Tartan, in that whereas Lucy indicates "lucid," "a tartan always consists of

²¹ Moorman, 25, 30.

²² *Ibid*, 30.

²³ Strickland, 304-5; Melville and Spengemann, 151.

²⁴ Strickland, 303.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 303-4.

²⁶ The depiction of the last scene in which Isabel embraces Pierre's corpse: " 'All's o'er, and ye know him not!' . . . , and her whole form sloped sideways, and she fell upon Pierre's heart, and her long hair ran over him, and arbored him in ebon vines."

more than one color."²⁷ Furthermore, resonating with the lightness represented by Lucy, the image of Pierre's father captures similar symbolic meanings. The stature of his father is compared with an "unclouded" and "snow-white" "marble form," which is enshrined in the "niche" of "the one central pillar" that has "supported...[Pierre's] moral life" (p. 68). Pierre, the name shared by the son and the father, which means "stone" in French, indicates that the son's stature has similar symbolic meanings. The appearance of Isabel with her claim to be the illegitimate daughter of his father evidently becomes symbolic dark veins in his father's snow-white marble stature as well as in the form of the son. Whereas her claim to be the illegitimate daughter of Pierre's father puts his reputation at stake, the son's decision to be her nominal husband to protect her leads to incest taboo, making the son's marble form as tarnished as his father's. Strickland's argument essentially emphasizes that Pierre fails to grasp the harsh reality of a universal coexistence of goodness and evil. By contrast, Watson's observation is out of the box of reading the characters and plots from a moral perspective. His focus is on the marvelous description of the psychological development of the main character, which he proposes is entirely done through the creation of other related characters and their interactions with Pierre. Watson proposes that people closely related to Pierre, such as his parents, Isabel, and Lucy, represent different parts of his soul.²⁸ He makes an observation on Lucy's and Isabel's functions of displaying the development of Pierre's inner world. "Lucy Tartan symbolise[s] those conscious elements of his soul that appear as yet all purity and goodness."²⁹ By contrast, Isabel represents the part of Pierre's soul that is guarded by "the purity of his upbringing," "waiting" to be awakened by the destructive force brought by her.³⁰ Watson further concludes that *Pierre* is about a man's "increase of consciousness" of these aspects of life.³¹

Watson's observation sheds light on the depiction of Nature in the first three paragraphs of Book I, which features the contrast between consciousness and unconsciousness. The opening paragraph presents a serene and unearthly world analogous to the

²⁷ Strickland, 304, 306.

²⁸ Watson, 197-8.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 200.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ E. L. Grant Watson, "Melville's *Pierre*," *The New England Quarterly* 3.2 (1930): 197. doi: 10.2307/359695.

Garden of Eden, in which Nature is likened to a human being who is aware of his existence and muses about his “profound mystery” (p. 3).³² Unlike his surroundings, Pierre wakes up from sleep and sets off for a countryside walk. “Pierre, dewily refreshed and spiritualized by sleep, gayly entered the long, wide, elm-arched street of the village, and half unconsciously bent his steps toward a cottage, which peeped into view near the end of the vista” (p. 3). Through the comparison of his movements with sparks and his slumberous surroundings with darkness, it is as if when Pierre moves, his sparks light and extends the presence of lightness in the world of darkness, reminiscent of human beings’ explorations into unexplored areas. The trope of Pierre roaming in a trance-like world resonates with Strickland’s observation. Strickland suggests that Lucy, the incarnation of lightness, represents “knowledge that is readily comprehensible to man.”³³ In other words, on the one hand, lightness resembles the color white in contrast to black; on the other hand, it refers to what is lighted and comprehended. Accordingly, darkness refers to what is veiled and cannot be comprehended. That said, since Isabel’s primary appearance in the sewing scene, darkness (or blackness) is a symbol that has been consistently used in indicating the veiled and the mysterious part.

The serenity and purity of this trance-like world is evocative of Lucy’s chamber (p. 39).³⁴ Wright compares the chamber to a heavenly place. Referring to Pierre’s experience of visiting Lucy’s chamber, Wright comments, “he feels as though he has ‘just peeped in at paradise.’”³⁵ Indeed, the interior of the room, which is

³² See also Richard Chase, *Herman Melville: A Critical Study* by Richard Chase (New York: Mac Millan, 1949), 128. The opening paragraph:

“THERE ARE some strange summer mornings in the country, when he who is but a sojourner from the city shall early walk forth into the fields, and be wonder-smitten with the trance-like aspect of the green and golden world. Not a flower stirs; the trees forget to wave; the grass itself seems to have ceased to grow; and all Nature, as if suddenly become conscious of her own profound mystery, and feeling no refuge from it but silence, sinks into this wonderful and indescribable repose.”

³³ Strickland, 305.

³⁴ The depiction of Pierre’s visit to the chamber: “So Pierre went up stairs, but paused on the threshold of the open door. He never had entered that chamber but with feelings of a wonderful reverentialness. The carpet seemed as holy ground. Every chair seemed sanctified by some departed saint, there once seated long ago.”

³⁵ Wright, 168.

depicted from Pierre's perspective, conveys the sense of sacredness. "The carpet seemed as holy ground. Every chair seemed sanctified by some departed saint, there once seated long ago" (p. 39). "The magic silence" of the chamber is reminiscent of the light sleep which Nature in the opening paragraph has fallen into (p. 39). Despite Pierre's uttermost reverence toward the chamber and its furniture, the whiteness of the bed is momentarily tarnished when Pierre catches sight of it in the mirror and seems to see a double image of it, leading him to doubt its genuineness at the moment (p. 39).³⁶ The double image resembles the dark veins of marble as well as Tartan in the name Lucy Tartan in that it similarly casts a shadow on the pure white image of the bed. The image, which vanishes in a second, similarly signifies the invisible and incomprehensible nature of the whiteness of the bed, which is caught sight of within a second by Pierre and leaves the viewer to wonder.

Strickland notes that the symbol of whiteness in *Pierre*, which represents purity and innocence as well as "ambiguity and complexity," is similar to the whiteness of *Moby Dick*.³⁷ But as Watson notes, darkness in *Pierre* is a symbol which captures similar ambiguities. As he observes, Isabel is of the same materials as the white whale in that she incarnates mysteries, "attractiveness," and "destructiveness."³⁸ By "destructiveness," he means that her claim to be Pierre's half-sister leads to his destructive decisions, causing his disownment, the death of his mother, and his own demise. In other words, even though black and white are supposed to represent opposite things, under the present context they carry similar implications about life.

The contrasts between lightness and darkness or whiteness and blackness, which are respectively represented by Lucy and

³⁶ Pierre catches sight of the double image of the snow-white bed:

"Now, crossing the magic silence of the empty chamber, he caught the snow-white bed reflected in the toilet-glass. This rooted him. For one swift instant, he seemed to see in that one glance the two separate beds—the real one and the reflected one—and an unbidden, most miserable presentiment thereupon stole into him. But in one breath it came and went. So he advanced, and with a fond and gentle joyfulness, his eye now fell upon the spotless bed itself, and fastened on a snow-white roll that lay beside the pillow."

³⁷ Strickland, 305.

³⁸ Watson, 228.

Isabel, indicates the antagonism between them. On a deep level, as all the symbols of whiteness such as Lucy's name entail dark spots, whiteness turns to be compatible with darkness. The destructive and mysterious natures of Isabel's blackness are reminiscent of those of the whiteness of Moby Dick, indicating that blackness in *Pierre* carries similar symbolic meanings as whiteness in *Moby Dick*.

The light or brightness in the above two scenes resonates with the light effect brought by the candles in the sewing chamber. While the light reveals the presence of some and draws the viewer's attention to them, it simultaneously overshadows the rest and restrains the viewer's vision. In other words, the restriction on the person's vision is similar to the function of a censorship restraining humans' perceptions. While reading the contrast of brightness and darkness created by natural light or artificial candles, it is natural to relate them to their human incarnations Lucy and Isabel. Associated with the symbolic meanings of Lucy and Isabel, with one representing the conventionally accepted and the other representing the conventionally expelled, Melville evidently criticizes the negative role of conventionality in the progress of human civilization.

Narcissistic Gaze

As the above sections focus on the three ladies who have significant influences on Pierre's life and his decisions at crucial moments, in the present section I analyze how Pierre views himself. At the beginning, the narration reveals that Pierre is longing for a sister upon whom he could perform fraternal love. When he casts a glance at a mirror, he could not help noticing that his reflected image seems to be another surnamed male Glendinning whom he could see. Pierre's glance at the mirror, in which he catches sight of his reflected image, reminds one of Ishmael's observations about water-gazers, revealing that Melville invests similar symbolic meanings in connection to Narcissus's myth. In the light of his observation about Milton's reinterpretation of biblical stories in *Paradise Lost*, including Eve's narcissistic gaze at her own image in the water and Satan's obsession with his pride which results in his destruction, Bryan C. Short proposes that the destructive decisions made by Pierre and Ahab reflect similar obsession with their prides.

The Narcissus myth depicts the tragedy of a beautiful youth who is lured by his reflection in the water and keeps on gazing at his own image until he dies. Narcissus's tragedy is also a

punishment on his pride. He is lured by Nemesis to the pool because the goddess learns about the youth's pride and plans to punish him. Short suggests that in *Paradise Lost*, Eve avoids her "fatal plunge" by choosing Adam as her partner instead of being obsessed with her image in the water.³⁹ In *Moby-Dick*, the protagonist Ishmael analogizes Narcissus's "tormenting, mild image" to the "phantom of life" water-gazers like Ahab could not grasp.⁴⁰ Short sees Ahab's chase of the white whale as his fatal plunge into "his own pain," which the captain "project(s)...onto the whale."⁴¹ In other words, Ahab's commanding the Pequod crew to chase the white whale is his fatal plunge into his own image, which he projects onto the whale. Short further observes that the actions of Pierre and his mother display narcissistic obsessions with their own images, leading to their tragedies. Mary's maternal love originates from an obsession with her own physical beauty, which is inherited by her son. The narrator makes an observation about the relationship between the parent and the child:

This romantic filial love of Pierre seemed fully returned by the triumphant maternal pride of the widow, who in the clear-cut lineaments and noble air of the son, saw her own graces strangely translated into the opposite sex. There was a striking personal resemblance between them. (p. 5)

Short notes that Isabel and Pierre, one who chooses to identify herself as the illegitimate child and the other who chooses to affirm the claim, are both water-gazers who plunge into their own images. Isabel's claim is based on her childhood recollection of a gentleman's visit and her realization of the resemblance between

³⁹ Bryan C. Short, "Multitudinous, God-omnipresent, Coral Insects: Pip, Isabel, and Melville's Miltonic Sublime," *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies* 4.1-2 (2002): 17, doi: 10.1353/lvn.2002.0005.

⁴⁰ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), 15-16. Ishmael's observation about water-gazers: "And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all."

⁴¹ Short, 17.

them, whereas Pierre's affirmation of her claim is based on her resemblance to his father's chair-portrait. According to Short, as the two persons' actions are similarly based on speculations, their deep motives simulate Eve's gaze at her own image in the water.⁴² However, unlike Eve, who avoids her fatal plunge by choosing Adam, the two succumb to incestuous desires. Though Short's suggestion on Pierre's narcissistic obsession highlights his sexual interest in Isabel, his observation gives insight into the current discussion on how Isabel's appearance metaphorically projects the development of Pierre's inner world. Pierre's recognition of Isabel as his half-sister reflects his narcissistic obsession with his image. In the beginning, we are informed that Pierre's longing for a sister originates from "that still stranger feeling of loneliness he sometimes experience[s], as not only the solitary head of his family, but the only surnamed male Glendinning extant" (p. 7) The glance he casts in the mirror catching his own image is reminiscent of Narcissus's gaze as well as the gazes of those water-gazers in *Moby-Dick* (pp. 7-8).⁴³ His image in the mirror similarly becomes the phantom which he, like a water-gazer, tries to grasp. Isabel's appearance fulfills all that Pierre wishes for. As she claims to be his half-sister (a claim which is not validated), her appearance fulfills Pierre's wish to have a sibling. Resembling Pierre's father as portrayed in the chair-portrait, she incarnates the phantom image, which Pierre catches sight of in the mirror. Like those aforementioned water-gazers who plunge into their images and meet their end, Pierre's decision brings destructive results as well. His announcement of his marriage with Isabel, which disguises his purposes of protecting her and hiding his father's sin, leads to his disownment by his mother who dies in solitude shortly after he and Isabel move to New York City. Unable to make a living as a writer in the city, he lives in poverty and dies in prison after being caught in brawl with Glen Stanley and fatally shooting his cousin.

However, Melville's quest to craft the complexity of life does not stop here. By rendering Isabel's identity unverified by any other individual except for her own claim, Melville suggests that the seemingly heroic behavior of Pierre, who believes the girl merely

⁴² Ibid, 25, 26.

⁴³ "A powerful and populous family had by degrees run off into the female branches; so that Pierre found himself surrounded by numerous kinsmen and kinswomen, yet companioned by no surnamed male Glendinning, but the duplicate one reflected to him in the mirror."

based on her resemblance to the chair-portrait of his father and his recollections about some ambiguous incidents taking place when he was a child, might turn out to be reckless (pp. 70–1, 76–8).⁴⁴

Isabel incarnates the reflected image which the water-gazer Pierre would catch sight of in the water. On the surface, Pierre's nominal marriage with Isabel inevitably leads to speculation about the incest taboo. On a deep level, the family tragedies following his announcement of his marriage simulate the punishment which Nemesis imposes upon Narcissus for his arrogance.

Conclusion

The emotional conflicts Pierre goes through seem to substantiate his erotic interest in Isabel. In fact, the fear of committing adultery results from the internalization of the impacts from outside sources such as his mother's accusation, which both serves as the enlightenment for the understanding of the new situation and as the introduction of immoral ideas that challenge the protagonist's confidence in his morality and cause his inner turmoil.

Pierre's connection with Lucy and Isabel is an analogy to the development of his consciousness, with Lucy representing what he is already conscious of and Isabel representing what he wants to know about. Because of the conventional thinking about the implications of whiteness and blackness, Lucy and Isabel have been superficially and falsely perceived as representing opposite forces such as evil and goodness, which often leads to analyses focusing on the characters' sensual desires. The dramatic contrast between the colors' conventional implications and Melville's innovative proposals about their meanings reveals his deep concern about the danger involved in conventions and existing norms that can easily turn humans into biased bigots.

Isabel's resemblance to the chair-portrait turns her into an incarnation of Pierre's reflection in the mirror, which associates Narcissus's myth with Pierre's motivation, indicating that in the end his family tragedy is a punishment for his obsession with his pride. Through the repetitive reference to Narcissus's gaze, which in both *Pierre* and *Moby-Dick* leads to the protagonists' tragedies,

⁴⁴ Pierre recollects that on his deathbed, his father constantly murmured, "My daughter! My daughter!" Pierre further recollects that when he was a kid, Aunt Dorothea once recounted that the father had a romantic relationship with a lady before he married and the father's chair-portrait was drawn at the time.

Melville reveals his deep concern about the destructive effects brought by human beings' obsession with themselves. However, with Isabel incarnating the ultimate mystery or the unexplored space as well as Pierre's reflection in the mirror, the destructive outcome of Pierre's actions seemingly indicates that Melville eventually displays an ambiguous attitude towards the exploration of the unknown.