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Chapter 1

AN INTERVIEW WITH DIANA SHEETS: FOUNDATIONAL AMERICAN WRITERS— HERMAN MELVILLE AND NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

Keywords: doubling, Hawthorne, Melville, *Moby-Dick*, *The Scarlet Letter*

MFS: In our interviews about great American authors we will examine pairs of writers and how their similarities and differences—which we’ll refer to as “doubling”—shape their portrayal of identity and consciousness in their fiction. Explain to our readers what you mean by doubling?

DS: Let’s use the definition provided by Ask.com: “Doubling is a literary device that is used to compare or contrast the familiar with the strange. It is most commonly used in Gothic literature where characters are literally or figuratively doubled in order to examine a hidden nature or desire” (“What is literary doubling?”, n.d.).

Doubling is evident in Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein* (1818). This Gothic horror story features Victor Frankenstein, a budding scientist, who creates a monstrous creature—Frankenstein’s double—whose actions lead to death and destruction. The story is a dark tale of the Industrial Age, a Gothic horror story that comingles the specter of science and technology replacing humans with automata. The story came to be characterized as science fiction because readers saw the “creature” as a harbinger for the menacing prospect of what we now call robots and cyborgs and their annihilating potential to human existence.

Other Gothic horror stories that employ doubling include Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) in which two identities—the “good” Dr. Jekyll and the “evil” Mr. Hyde reside in the same body. Then there’s Bram Stoker’s novel *Dracula* (1897) in which the familiarity of “strangeness” connects the characters Dracula and Van Helsing in this vampire tale (“What is literary doubling?”, n.d.).

Melville met with Richard Bentley, a British publisher, to discuss the forthcoming publication of *Moby-Dick*, and while in London received from him a copy of Shelley’s

Frankenstein. The story begins as an epistolary exchange that creates the setting for the perilous journey of an exploratory scientific vessel making its way through Artic waters. Frankenstein is on board in pursuit of his deadly monster. As difficulties mount and the ice threatens to destroy the boat, Frankenstein urges the crew members to persevere: “Oh! be men, or be more than men. . . . This ice is not made of such stuff as your hearts may be; it is mutable, and cannot withstand you, if you say that it shall not” (citing Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in Delbanco, 2006, p. 129).

Little wonder, then, that Melville was inspired by this tale. Frankenstein’s pursuit of the monster influenced Melville’s framing of Ahab’s monomaniacal hunt for the great white whale.

MFS: What does Melville’s and Hawthorne’s fiction have to do with the emergence of novels of consciousness?

DS: Let’s begin with the historical and literary context of these writers because it’s difficult to comprehend the complexity of Melville and Hawthorne’s relationship without understanding how their fiction was shaped by the era in which they lived. F. O. Matthiessen coined the term the “American Renaissance” in 1941 to describe the exceptionally fertile years between 1850-1855 that gave birth to America’s literary identity, which shaped its character and national destiny. In this short space of time, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851) and *Pierre* (1852), Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854), and Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (1855) were published. These works and those of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emily Dickenson, and Edgar Allan Poe created the firmament for our cultural heritage (Matthiessen, 2006, p. vii).

Nearly 50 years later, David S. Reynolds in his book *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* examines the circumstances that gave rise to “the emergence of America’s national literature in the first half of the nineteenth century” (Reynolds, 1988, p. 7).

Recently, Philip F. Gura in *Truth’s Ragged Edge: The Rise of the American Novel* examines the cultural context shaping the American novel during its first 100 years (1789-1870s). He traces the nation’s shift towards a burgeoning self-consciousness by 1850 that spurned the censorious judgments of God, harsh Calvinistic ministers, and righteous Puritans in favor of Protestant denominations that fostered, according to Emerson, “a new consciousness” founded on the conception that “the individual is the world” (Emerson cited by Gura, 2013, p. xi). This created the foundations for a secular belief system increasingly shaped by the principles of self-determination and free will. Gura explores the preconditions that gave rise to inward-looking fiction steeped in the psychological foundations of self that propel the actions of characters in Hawthorne’s and Melville’s fiction. This burgeoning consciousness, a direct outgrowth of religious transformations of the early 19th century, demonstrated to Emerson that “the mind had become aware of itself” (Gura, 2013, p. xi). These developments, in turn, paved the way for the emergence of the literary realism of Henry James (1843-1916). His fiction, steeped in interiority, anticipates the 20th-century novels of consciousness including the fiction of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf.

MFS: But how is doubling evident in the writings or personalities of Melville and Hawthorne?

DS: What we'll be exploring in this series of Q&As are the connections uniting and fracturing the familiar (similarities) with the strange (differences) in pairs or groups of writers under examination. Hawthorne was 15 years older than Melville, nearly a generation apart. Nevertheless, they both matured in an era transitioning away from righteous fervor and poised toward a secular future. Neither man was religious by inclination, although in later years Melville may have yearned for spiritual release. This transitional age would define both men.

The changing social mores enables Hawthorne to write and publish *The Scarlet Letter*, something that would have been unthinkable 50 years previously. While the affair between Reverend Dimmesdale and his parishioner Hester Prynne happens off-stage, preceding the written story, nevertheless, it's the sexual passion that drives the narrative and saturates the novel in sin. For as Harold Bloom suggests, "Hester Prynne is primarily a sexual being, a truth about her that scarcely can be overemphasized" since "what matters most about Hester is the vital intensity of her being" (Bloom, 2015, pp. 234-5).

The Scarlet Letter is a parable of sin and redemption—at least for Hester and ultimately for Reverend Dimmesdale, although not for her villainous husband, aptly named Chillingworth. The omniscient narrator presents the story at a quasi-secular remove, sympathetic toward the plight of Hester who gains heroic stature even as the other characters appear diminished. While the three main characters are vivid, the literary prose simultaneously succeeds and fails. It succeeds at revealing the psychological state of mind that shapes "the individual's consciousness" and propels behavior (Gura, 2013, p. xvii). It fails, by way of comparison to *Moby-Dick*, due to its conventional linear narrative, its stilted Puritanical dialogue, and its essential compliance with the stylistic conventions of the mid-19th-century novel.

Both authors are "doubles", twins, in a manner of speaking, who challenge, to a lesser and greater degree, the mainstream literary conventions of their day. But they are also "doubles" defined by their differences and, therefore, at odds with one another. Hawthorne's writing style is, as Reynolds suggests, a "benign-subversive style" (Reynolds, 1988, pp. 90-91). However Melville's fiction beginning with *Moby-Dick*, I would argue, is outright "subversive". Why? Because it upends conventions. Consider the quirky relationship between Ishmael and his bunkmate Queequeg. Notice the shifting "point of view" that cause Ismael's narration to bleed into omniscient narration or even, as Delbanco suggests, a "choral narration" as the story shifts from Ishmael tale to Ahab's narrative (Delbanco, 2006, p. 11). *Moby-Dick* builds to what today might be characterized as a meta-fictional conclusion that anticipates not only modernism but also postmodernism. If *The Scarlet Letter* is a tightly controlled story that never loses its grip or voice, *Moby-Dick* is about excess that subverts and leaves flotsam in its wake.

In terms of personality, Hawthorne and Melville were opposites. Hawthorne was self-contained, restrained, walled-in, revealing himself ultimately only to his wife, Sophia. Melville, on the other hand, was intense, open, needy, and persistently engaged. Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is a parable that resonates with women more than men both because of the story's feminized context—love and sin and redemption and the emotions that drive these states of being—as well as by the author's desire that the novel serve as a tribute to his recently departed mother (Wineapple, 2003, p. 212). Melville's *Moby-Dick*, conversely, was

conceived as a masculine story that no woman reader should read, as he made clear in his letter to Sarah Morewood.

Don't you buy it—don't you read it when it does come out, because it is by no means a sort of book for you. It is not a piece of fine feminine Spitalfields silk, but it is of the humble texture of a fabric that should be woven of ships' cables & hawsers. A Polar wind blows through it & birds of prey hover over it. Warn all gentle and fastidious people. (Melville cited in Sheets, 2007)

If Hawthorne sought to write fiction that would appeal to a feminized audience, than Melville rejected what Harriet Beecher Stowe referred to as the “Pink and White Tyranny” (Stowe cited in Sheets, 2007). Melville’s refusal to write novels that appealed to women cost him considerably both in terms of his literary stature and economic livelihood. However, as he noted to Hawthorne, “Dollars damn me. What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the *other* way I cannot” (Melville cited in Gura, 2013, p. 202).

In terms of doubling, Hawthorne and Melville are primarily a study in contrasts, differing in style, approach, and personality. Nevertheless, both wrote fiction that is implicitly psychological, shaped by a burgeoning self-consciousness that is secular in its implications, albeit steeped in biblical allusions.

MFS: How did the novels of Hawthorne and Melville impact your life?

DS: When I was fifteen, I had the good fortune to be placed in an English honors class in high school. Under the guidance of a great teacher, Mr. Pearson, we read many of the American literary classics. While I loved fiction, I had never before read great literature. I was excited and, at the same time, defensive and intimidated. I didn’t entirely accept the notion of “great literature”. I doubted that I would like it. But as I read these stories, the world around me became bigger, more vibrant, more real. Reading Hawthorne and Melville changed my life.

Why? *The Scarlet Letter* is about passion and sin and good and evil. It’s about a vigilant Puritan community sitting in judgment of a woman who had sexually transgressed. She has to pay for her peccancy for the remainder of her life. At first, it seems as if she alone will be punished. Later, it becomes clear that both her lover and her husband pay their price. But Hester Prynne has to stand before the community and experience public censure and recrimination. Ultimately, this punishment strengthens her, but at a terrible cost. Hester becomes an outsider for the remainder of her life. Although she raises her daughter, Pearl, in some sense the child is never really hers. Pearl is always just beyond her grasp, elusive, unbounded. Hester can never have motherly expectations that generally come with raising a daughter. Nor can she anticipate having her child and possibly her grandchildren close by. Hester stands alone. Hester pays a heavy toll—one that we can scarcely imagine. But in her solitary journey Hester gains authenticity and a nobility denied to everyone else. Hester Prynne is a heroine of a different kind. Few of us could shoulder her burden and her despair while retaining her courage and humility.

Moby-Dick and *The Scarlet Letter* are dichotomies on the literary spectrum. *The Scarlet Letter* seems too puritanical, too dated to draw us entirely in while, nevertheless, remaining deeply revealing of our nation and ourselves. By contrast, *Moby-Dick* surprises, resists, and

defies our expectations at every turn. The story is enthralling, its writing is complex. The scope of *Moby-Dick* is so vast, so mesmerizing, it seems as if it might be a “literary theory of everything”, a transfiguration of the known world beyond our wildest imagination. The story engages immediately, comingling the familiar and the strange. This trait, what Harold Bloom, borrowing from Walter Pater, defines as “adding strangeness to beauty” is a characteristic he suggests intrinsic to all canonical works of great literature. For, as Bloom noted, “When you read a canonical work for the first time you encounter a stranger, an uncanny startlement rather than a fulfillment of expectations” (Bloom cited in Sheets, 2010, p. 168).

Moby-Dick’s conclusion is cosmic: biblical in its implications, steeped in tragedy, and encapsulated in its own singularity. Sandwiched between characters and plot and heroics and beginnings and ends are endless whaling details recounted with sweat and toil that emit the scent of manly passion, megalomania, obsession, hate, and vengeance. The quest subsumes all. This novel with its tidal currents of multiculturalism, cultural relativism, and its suggestion of “man-love” transports us across its vast oceanic vistas from 1851 directly into the 21st century. *Moby-Dick* transcends the plausible while remaining steeped in realism and drenched in symbolism. It defies rationality while deeply resonating with us. The dream of vengeance bleeds into the catastrophe of failure. And the loss? Tragic, beyond the bounds of ordinary human existence.

I grew up in seaside community on the East coast near a village where ship captains and their first mates sailed round the world. Some of the houses had “widow’s walks”, platforms mounted on rooftops where wives—or other family members—climbed up to look out with spyglasses nervously hoping, sometimes in vain, for the safe return of their men. Today, many of the wooden-framed colonial houses bear plaques with the names of some of these sea-faring men. Several streets are named after illustrious townsmen of that era. I went to school with some of the descendants of these families. The village nearby was, until World War II, the wooden boat-building capital of the world. A few miles away, in another seaside village, was the Nathan Palmer’s house. He was a renowned ship’s captain who discovered the Antarctic Peninsula and whose namesakes—“Palmer Land” and the “Palmer Archipelago” still appear on Antarctic maps. These experiences should have shaped my appreciation and passion for *Moby-Dick*. Instead, the book remained a thing unto itself. Godly or post-apocalyptic in its import, it transcended all that I knew or thought I understood.

MFS: In order to understand the “Great American Novel” one has to understand Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Can you explain why the typical reader has to grasp the writings, and poems and perhaps even the lives of these two American writers?

DS: Our modern understanding and appreciation of the Great American Novel has its foundation in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851). Think of these as literary works of imagination that tell the American story, that illuminate who we were and what we are becoming. These novels take us on a journey from our foundational beginnings as a national culture up through today. They inform us not only of who we were, but also why—as a nation and a people—we made and make the choices we do. To quote William Faulkner, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” (Faulkner, 2011, p. 73). Without these stories and the understanding that comes with them, we are nothing. We possess nothing. We know nothing.

In order to understand the context of the Great American Novel and some of the examples under its purview, I invite our readers to take a look at Lawrence Buell's *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, a great introduction to the subject (Buell, 2014).

MFS: When one initially compares and contrasts the fiction of Hawthorne and Melville, one confronts the concepts of sin and evil and guilt and morality, on one hand, and, on the other, a metaphysical inquiry about the nature of existence set against the backdrop of those forbidding seas and those vast horizons. Do these themes reflect their lives or the spirit of the times in which they lived?

DS: A writer's work is always, in some sense, both a reflection of the times and the life of the writer. Let's begin with Hawthorne.

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864), born in Salem, was a sixth generation Hathorne to live there (the author added a "w" to his surname, probably to distance himself from some of his notorious ancestors). His great-great-great grandfather William Hathorne had emigrated from England and eventually settled in Salem where he joined the Congregationalist First Church. As a selectman, William Hathorne voted to banish Reverend Roger Williams from the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He assumed a number of prominent political roles in the colony including an appointment as magistrate and, later, as judge. His sentencing was severe, and his actions against Quakers harshly punitive. Thus, he ordered Ann Coleman, a Quaker, to be dragged, according to Hawthorne biographer Brenda Wineapple, "half naked through town while being lashed with a whip of knotted cords, and under his watch, another poor blasphemer was flogged until his back turned to jelly" (Wineapple, 2003, p. 15).

However, it was John Hathorne, William's son, whose actions are emblazoned in our historical memory. As a Salem magistrate during the witch trials, he sentenced twenty people to death. Indeed, on the day the final eight were executed, Hathorne met with William Stoughton and Cotton Mather in Samuel Sewall's home to discuss publishing some of the proceedings of the Salem witch trials (*Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1674-1729*, pp. 365-366). There were no indications, either at the time or later, that Hathorne regretted his actions.

Three hundred years later these witch trials resonate in our cultural memory. Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* (1953), for example, is about the Salem witch trials. It serves as an allegory for McCarthyism, the communist "Red Scare" or "witch hunt" instigated by Senator McCarthy in which politicians, scientists, academics, Hollywood celebrities, and others lost their jobs because of their real or alleged ties to the Communist Party.

Given that Nathaniel Hawthorne grew up in Salem, history and ancestry suffused his daily life. Not surprisingly, David Levin suggests he "studied Puritan history with a persistence that some scholars (along with Hawthorne himself) have considered obsessive" (Levin, 1998, p. 47).

Richard Brodhead describes the accuracy of the historical setting and story context created by Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*.

This world possess, first, a dense social and historical reality. The feelings and forms of behavior of the Puritan characters are linked to the outlook of a particular group set in a particular moment in time. . . . Hawthorne's concern for accuracy of historical detail is evident throughout the book, but his interest is never merely antiquarian; all his

descriptions of physical settings work to exhibit the nature of the society that creates them. (Brodhead, 1986, p. 157)

But it's the psychological undercurrent to *The Scarlet Letter* that transforms it from a historical novel to a literary masterpiece. "Hawthorne's world", suggests Brodhead, "possesses a dense psychological reality. He endows his characters with their own individuating tempers and desires, then watches their peculiar consciousness responding to their situations and to one another" (Brodhead, 1986, p. 158).

What makes *The Scarlet Letter* fascinating reading is that the omniscient narrator—whose views would appear to approximate those of the author—relays the tragic events while reframing from censorious judgment. We deduce the author's point of view ultimately through the personalities, actions, and destinies of his characters.

In the case of Hester Prynne, we witness how her suffering ennobles her. She is never exonerated for her sin. Nevertheless, Hester's good works and her solitary journey suggest the extent of her sacrifice. Hester's penance and dignity in the face of overwhelming sacrifice—death of a lover, absence of a daughter, loss of the companionship of grandchildren and friends—elevates her to nearly saintly stature.

Hawthorne's intellectual and emotional distance from Salem's righteous Puritans enables him to present the biblical ideas and historical events in *The Scarlet Letter* dispassionately. He succeeds in illuminating the psychological tumult motivating the thoughts and actions of his three main characters. Hawthorne's skillful interleaving of sexual titillation and moral redemption communicated dispassionately by means of an omniscient narrator succeeds because of the cultural shift from religiosity toward secularism.

The gap between sermons and novels, between religious poetry and secular poetry, between sacred allegory and earthly story—in short, the gap between doctrinal social texts and entertaining imaginative texts—suddenly became far narrower than it had been in Puritan times. Previously sacrosanct themes and genres were made available for purely stylized use by American writers. The major literature was produced at this crucial watershed moment between the metaphysical past and the secular future, between the typological, otherworldly ethos of Puritanism and the mimetic, earthly world of literary realism (Reynolds, 1988, p. 16).

To understand how Herman Melville's (1819-1891) ocean-going experiences influenced *Moby-Dick*, we have only to read the description provided by his biographer Laurie Robertson-Lorant of the whaling boat *Acushnet* under which he sailed before jumping ship in the South Pacific.

During the remainder of the *Acushnet's* four-and-a-half-year maiden cruise, half of her crew would desert, one sailor would commit suicide, and two would die of venereal diseases. On the return voyage, her first and third mates jumped ship at Payta, Peru, leaving only eleven men on board when she arrived in port. In 1851, shortly after *Moby-Dick* was published, Melville learned that the *Acushnet* had run aground on St. Lawrence Island and broken up in heavy seas. (Robertson-Lorant, 1998, p. 106)

As grim as life on board a whaling ship may have seemed given the above account, it was bold and adventurous in Melville's imagination, providing material for two best-selling South Sea adventure novels—*Typee* (1846) and its sequel *Omoo* (1847). Living among the cannibals in a South Pacific paradise? Imprisoned in Tahiti? What could be more exciting, dangerous, and exotic? Indeed Melville's experiences at sea would provide material for at

least five novels—*Typee*, *Omoo*, *Mardi*, *White-Jacket*, *Redburn*—in addition to *Moby-Dick* (Delbanco, 2006, p. 45). But nothing, as D. H. Lawrence noted with a literary flourish, that could have foreshadowed the misery that awaited Melville after marrying Elizabeth Shaw.

Melville came home to face out the long rest of his life. He married and had an ecstasy of a courtship and fifty years of disillusion. He had just furnished his home with disillusion. No more Typees. No more paradises. No more Fayaways. A mother: a gorgon. A home: a torture box. A wife: a thing with clay feet. Life: a sort of disgrace. . . . The whole shameful business just making a man writhe. Melville writhed for eighty years. (Lawrence cited by Hardwick, 2000, p. 57)

If the frenzied hunt these days for oil and gas to fuel our growing energy needs seems to some to border on the obscene, it's important to realize just how important the pursuit of whale oil was for homes and industry throughout much of the 19th century. The prized oil of the sperm whale led to its global pursuit, which peaked around the time *Moby-Dick* was published. By 1849 “two thirds of the worldwide fleet of about 1,000 whaleships were, in fact, American, of which 249 vessels sailed out of New Bedford and another 69 out of Nantucket” (Delbanco, 2006, p. 40). Indeed, the heightened drama of harpooning a whale at close range was already drawing to a close by the time Melville's novel was published (Delbanco, 2006, pp. 40-41). To place this in perspective, by 1859 petroleum accounted for only 2,000 barrels a year in the United States. “Forty years later”, according to Derek Thompson, “we were producing 2,000 barrels every 17 minutes” (Thompson, 2012). For a gripping nonfictional rendering of the actual circumstances that inspired the writing of *Moby-Dick*, I urge our readers to read Nathaniel Philbrick's masterful *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex* (Philbrick, 2000).

Thus, in Melville's case his whaling experience was, in some sense, a larger part of our national story. *Moby-Dick* should have—so we would like to think—resonated with the public. However several events conspired to limited enthusiasm and sales. The book was published initially in England with careless editing and minus its critical epilogue that tells of Ishmael's survival. The reviews in America, based on the British edition, were damning, in part, because of the missing ending. By the time that American edition appeared, it was too late to sway public opinion. Hawthorne, for whom Melville had dedicated the book, was publically silent about the literary merits of *Moby-Dick*. That omission would ultimately prove fatal to Melville's career. Other novels and other stories followed, mostly to mediocre, if damning, reviews. His readership plummeted. Melville turned to writing poetry, which he had trouble publishing. Not surprisingly, he had to find other means of supporting himself.

The reasons behind Melville's literary failure are complex. Unlike *The Scarlet Letter*, which courted a feminized audience, *Moby-Dick*, as with most of Melville's later fiction, placed demands upon its readers. The novel, as Delbanco notes, “jumped from omniscient to first-person to choral narration, mixing the proper speech of well-bred offices with the dirty songs of illiterate sailors” (Delbanco, 2006, p. 11). The style meandered, digressive rather than sequential, which made it difficult for most readers. The center of the novel had long narrations on the whaling industry—almost as if it were a whaling manual, rather than a novel. The style seemed almost modern with postmodern leanings. Not surprisingly, D. H. Lawrence deemed Melville “a futurist long before futurism” (Lawrence cited in Delbanco, 2006, p. 11).

As Ann Douglas suggested in *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977), during this period there was the cultural shift from “manly” Calvinism to a more forgiving and empathetic Protestantism. The ministerial emphasis swerved from damnation and sin to an emphasis on emotions emphasizing empathy and forgiveness. This paved the way for the increasing feminization of fiction and buttressed the burgeoning female readers whose values and interests increasingly dominated the marketplace. If Hawthorne instinctively understood that audience, Melville did not and would not. As Douglas noted, Melville’s focus on “the lost, the overlooked, the forgotten, the obscure, and the inaccessible” limited his readership (Douglas, 1998, p. 298). His emphasis on economic details, his use of muscular prose, his insistence on a fiction that defied boundaries, all these factors ensure that, as Douglas has suggested, even today Melville remains the least read of all our major literary writers in America (Douglas cited in Sheets, 2007).

MFS: Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville were reportedly friends for a while, and may have impacted each other, much as C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien impacted each other. How much did their writing styles touch each other—or were they both influenced by Shakespeare and the Bible?

DS: Great writers often find it difficult, if not impossible, to be friends. The quest for greatness is a solitary one that generally defies intimacy with one’s potential rivals. Writers prefer adoring fans to literary gladiators. This tension between writers was evident with Hawthorne and Melville. Their initial meeting was an enthusiastic sharing of ideas and interests. However, Melville’s needs seemed boundless: a desire for intimacy, a wish that Hawthorne would publically acknowledge the younger author’s literary genius, and a burning desire for a fraternal friendship that may have had sexual innuendos. This intensity was too demanding for Hawthorne, who preferred intimacy with his wife, Sophia, to the complications of an intense friendship with a fellow literary writer.

While at one point Melville contacted Hawthorne to offer him a story idea, it was never embraced by Hawthorne. Their literary differences exceeded their commonalities. Melville was greatly influenced by Shakespeare, Milton, Virgil, and the Bible (among others). Hawthorne frequently borrowed from biblical and historical material to peer into our dark psyche.

MFS: Hester Prynne and Billy Budd were each impacted by their situations and the ideas of good and evil. Were these themes of their times? Or were there other deeper nefarious, psychological themes at work?

DS: Let’s shift the analysis to Hawthorne’s *The House of Seven Gables* (1851) and Melville’s *Billy Budd* (published posthumously in 1924), arguably the best novels by these authors after their masterpieces, *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby-Dick*. For some critics, Hawthorne’s *The House of Seven Gables* is marred by its reductive distillation into allegory. Each of the gables might be interpreted as one of the seven deadly sins. Readers can, without much difficulty, identify characters who evince the sins of sloth, envy, lust, avarice, anger, gluttony, and pride in a story that takes place in Salem and, as with *The Scarlet Letter*, is steeped in witchcraft and immersed in the themes of sin, guilt, retribution, and atonement. These themes resonated

with Hawthorne and with the general public, but *The House of Seven Gables* never achieves the complexity or character development evident in *The Scarlet Letter*.

The same might be said of *Billy Budd*. The unpublished manuscript was discovered in 1919, years after Melville's death. The novella presents the story of Billy Budd, a handsome, young seaman, unfairly accused of conspiracy to mutiny, who in frustration and anger inadvertently kills his vile accuser, master-at-arms, John Claggart. While it's clear that Billy Budd is innocent of conspiring to mutiny, nevertheless, maritime law stipulates that during wartime a blow—fatal or not—constitutes a capital crime. Billy is convicted and publically hanged. Beauty, youth, and (moral) innocence are sacrificed in homage to the legal code. Conceived initially in verse, the story was reborn as prose. As with *The House of Seven Gables*, *Billy Budd* can be read as allegory. The character Billy Budd can be interpreted as a symbol of Christ or Adam or even an exemplar of America's coming-of-age (Davis, 1984). Melville's anger and outrage at life's injustice give way in this novella to resignation and acceptance with even a modicum of grace. Bloom regards *Billy Budd* as a "late epiphany" (Bloom, 2015, p. 192). Never, however, does it approach the majesty, complexity, and brilliance of *Moby-Dick*.

What's interesting and important about Hawthorne and Melville is that they lived during an era when biblical ideas and texts were central to daily life. Whether Hawthorne and Melville believed and observed religious doctrine and its rituals is, in some sense, immaterial. What mattered was that they lived in a community of believers for whom faith and spirituality were central to their lives. Good and evil were not abstract concepts. They were informed by emotional beliefs founded upon scripture that proscribed how individuals should live and society should function. While the modern concept of "self" and its association with identity was being forged in the 19th century, it was a far, far cry from anything that remotely resembled today's identity politics and the highly individualistic cult of "the self".

Today, borrowing from Jonathan Haidt's book *The Righteous Mind* (Haidt, 2012), we are WEIRD (Western, educated, industrial, rich, and democratic). As such, we place our emphasis on social mores, rather than religious scripture or beliefs. Today, these beliefs and values in Western societies are based almost exclusively on doctrines of social justice: "do no harm" and "be fair". They do not unify across class, gender, and race to form a universal spiritual belief system that favors the whole at the expense of the individual. Consequently, our secular mind struggles to comprehend *The Scarlet Letter*. But it's important to understand the cultural contexts and undercurrents of Judeo-Christian beliefs and how these continue to shape and influence our society even if we seldom perceive these influences consciously in our daily lives.

If *Billy Budd* is a tale about the evil inflicted on a beautiful and just man (the story, in its way, is a secular parable about sin and social injustice), *The Scarlet Letter* shocks us because it uncovers the religious core of our cultural heritage that undergirds our social belief systems today. We need to understand those times in order to comprehend how these ideas and values live on in our nominally civil society. Simply put, we can't live just in the present. We must understand our historical origins and how these factors influence who we are and how they shape our cultural destiny. As good as *Billy Budd* is—and there is little doubt about its merit—it doesn't compare to *The Scarlet Letter*. The latter ventures into the deep, deep reaches of our soul. Therein lies its continued power and its majesty.

MFS: Both of these writers seem to have been impacted by the “dark night of the soul” or depression. What do we know about the mental health of these two great American authors, and how their emotional state may have impacted their writing?

DS: Writing is a prolonged interior journey into the darkest reaches of our mind. Spend much time there and any of us, perhaps all of us, have the potential to succumb to the “dark night of the soul”. Whatever demons that possessed Hawthorne were internalized and put to great use in his fiction. He had considerable success as a writer.

Melville’s mature fiction placed his writing in a class unto itself (*sui generis*), which made the struggle for recognition and understanding that much more arduous. After the success of *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), readers rejected his fiction and never warmed to his poetry. In 1867 his eldest son, Malcom, shot himself in the family home. His younger son, Stanwix, died in San Francisco in 1886. The devastating parental blows were compounded by the humiliations inflicted in the literary marketplace making daily life tortuous for Melville.

MFS: “Call me Ishmael” is one of the great beginning lines of early American writing. But Melville's prose then digressed into long diatribes and Hawthorne's initial foray into puritanical obsession with sin and guilt later in his life shifted to nature (*The Great Stone Face*) and romance (*The Dolliver Romance*). Does this reflect growth of a writer or experimentation into different forms of interest and writing or something else entirely?

DS: *Moby-Dick*’s memorable beginning “Call me Ishmael” was effectively parodied by Philip Roth in his opening line—“Call me Smitty”—that appeared in his book *The Great American Novel* (Roth, 1973, p. 1). The novel *Jaws* (1972) by Peter Benchley became, in Steven Spielberg’s film rendering (1975), the epic tale of *Moby-Dick* reimagined through the frenzied pursuit of a great white shark. However, in the movie Ahab is victorious (that is, two of the three men on the quest succeed) and the great white is slain.

Moby-Dick is realism personified, but it’s also a metaphysical journey of infinite longing and its tragic consequences. While most readers in today’s feminized world see Ahab’s megalomaniacal pursuit of the great white whale as tragic or demonic, Harold Bloom (and Spielberg by extension, I might add) regard Ahab’s quest as the embodiment of the “epic hero” (Bloom, 2015, p. 10). Let me suggest that greatness necessitates hubris. It insists that we ignore the odds, the consequences, the cost of failure. It demands that we journey across the seas in pursuit of the unknown and aspire to reach the heavens because they’re there. And never, ever, do we give up the quest, no matter what the consequences. To achieve the impossible or nearly impossible, we must pursue Ahab’s quest with all the bravery necessary come what may.

Borrowing from physics, *Moby-Dick* is the literary equivalent of a theory of everything (ToE). Melville’s ambition is nearly infinite. That’s the attraction and the challenge of *Moby-Dick*. We forgive the excesses because of the power of the writing, the gift of storytelling, the brilliant beginning and the mesmerizing conclusion. We’re willing to take that journey because novels aren’t tidy the way short stories are. They’re ungainly. Ultimately they fail in their drive for perfection while the best short stories are nearly perfect in their execution. But with a great novel we get panoramic vistas that enlarge our imagination. We overlook the

imperfections provided the story is worthy. It must have a perspective, a distinctive voice, points of view that are compelling: It must take us somewhere that changes our concept of ourselves or the world. Yes, to all of the above with respect to *Moby-Dick*. Then, and only then, do we forgive those sins of omission, those digressive flights of fancy. Fiction is about being human, which is less than perfection.

Harold Bloom characterizes Melville and Hawthorne under the category of “American High Romantic” (Bloom, 2015, pp. 11, 228). I believe it’s helpful to regard Hawthorne’s fiction as an unholy amalgam of Gothic horror wedded to American High Romance. Then, the unity of his stories becomes more apparent.

MFS: Religion seems to have impacted Melville more than Hawthorne (“Clarel: A Poem and a Pilgrimage”) or were Hawthorne’s spiritual and religious leanings subjugated into his work? And how does religion and spirituality figure into the work of these foundational American authors?

DS: “If we are to completely understand Melville’s poetry”, Robert Penn Warren has suggested, “we must see it against the backdrop of his defeat as a writer” (Warren cited in Delbanco, 2006, p. 267). The author’s abject despair was evident to Hawthorne when Melville visited him in England in 1856 on route to the Holy Land. There he presented Hawthorne a copy of his manuscript *The Confidence-Man*, his last published novel in his lifetime. In Hawthorne’s telling, Melville lived by virtue of the fact that he had neither belief nor atheism, neither hope nor nihilism. It was a limbo without reprieve, without sanctuary, the bleakest state imaginable.

Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had “pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated”; but still he does not seem to rest in this anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists—and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before—in wandering to-and-fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. If he were a religious man, he would be one of the most truly religious and reverential; he has a very high and noble nature, and better worth immortality than the rest of us. (Hawthorne cited in Delbanco, 2006, pp. 252-253)

Melville’s pilgrimage to the Holy Land became the basis for his spiritual poem “Clarel”, the most lengthy poem in American literature. At 18,000 lines, it exceeded both the “Iliad” and “Paradise Lost”. By 1860 he appeared to be writing poetry regularly. “Clarel” was his lifeline to spiritual awakening juxtaposed with the crisis of faith in the Christian community produced by Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of the Species* (1859). Today critics are more charitable about the poem, tending to view it as a precursor to T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land”. Nevertheless, when it was published, the criticism was damning. *The Independent*, the nation’s most highly regarded religious weekly at the time, was quick to judgment, referring to it as a “vast work” that was “destitute of interest or metrical skill” (*The Independent* cited by Bezanson, 1960, p. xli).

Writing about sin, evil, guilt and morality was deeply personal to Hawthorne. As Melville noted, Hawthorne's "great power of blackness . . . derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from which visitations, in some sense or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free" (Melville cited in Delbanco, 2006, p. 138). Hawthorne's fiction, as the editor of *The Literary World*, Evert Duyckinck noted, was saturated in "the shadow which Sin and Death in their twin flights are forever casting upon the world; shadows which fall alike upon the so-called evil and the good, which darken all that is pure, and defile all that is sacred. . . ." (Duyckinck cited in Gura, 2013, p. 188). Melville later referred to Hawthorne's dark outlook as the "power of blackness ten times black" (Melville cited in Gura, 2013, p. 188).

Nevertheless, this dark quality—Hawthorne's "sense of sin"—was, according to Henry James, "almost exclusively *imported*". That is, he suggested, "it seems to exist there merely for an artistic or literary purpose". By which he meant that "it was only, as one may say, intellectual; it was not moral and theological" (James, 1879, pp. 58-59). Indeed, he attributed to Hawthorne his own defect "that queer monster, the artist" by which he meant, suggests Delbanco, "a vampiric monster, that is, who sucks up for his own sustenance the loves and sorrows of his human subjects" (cited in Delbanco, 2006, p. 210). Thus, in Henry James's rendering, Hawthorne's tortured fiction was not indicative of his personal or spiritual anguish. Instead, it was drawn from the dark material around him that would prove a vital source for his literary inspiration.

MFS: As with most great writers, we think of one or two works immediately when reflecting on their names and books—obviously, Melville and *Moby-Dick* comes to the fore, and *The Scarlet Letter* is linked with Nathaniel Hawthorne. But as a connoisseur of literature, what other works by these two giants of American literature need to be read, reviewed, studied and appreciated?

DS: I recommend my favorites short stories by both writers, which delight because they utterly defy our expectations. The first, "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853), is by Melville. It is one of the strangest stories in modern literature. Bartleby, a copyist employed by a law firm, begins one day to refuse all job-related requests with the memorable phrase "I would prefer not to". He stops working. He won't leave. Eventually the law firm moves since there seems to be no way to force Bartleby to leave. The new tenant in the building—the location is Wall Street—has him forcibly evicted and sent to prison where Bartleby dies of starvation. The bleakness and absurdity of the story hints at Melville's dark frame of mind, and it anticipates the futility of Kafka's *The Castle*.

Then, there is Hawthorne's story "Wakefield" (1835), characterized by Bloom as one of "the finest stories in the language" (Bloom, 2015, p. 223). "Wakefield" was celebrated by Jorge Luis Borges, arguably one of, if not the best short story writers of the 20th century. Bloom suggests (rightly) reading "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and "Wakefield" "side by side" (Bloom, 2015, p. 224). The narrative presents the story of Wakefield, who lives in London. One day he leaves his wife of 10 years and rents a room just one street away. Over the course of two decades he observes his wife, frequently hovering close at hand, a perpetual witness to the altered course of her life without him. Then, having been presumed dead for 20 years, he returns and becomes "a loving spouse till death" (Hawthorne, 1974, p. 130). With little plot development, this story, which I'll cheekily characterize as "voyeurism on steroids",

confounds and delights through its obstinate refusal to illuminate the cause or consequence of Wakefield's behavior.

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