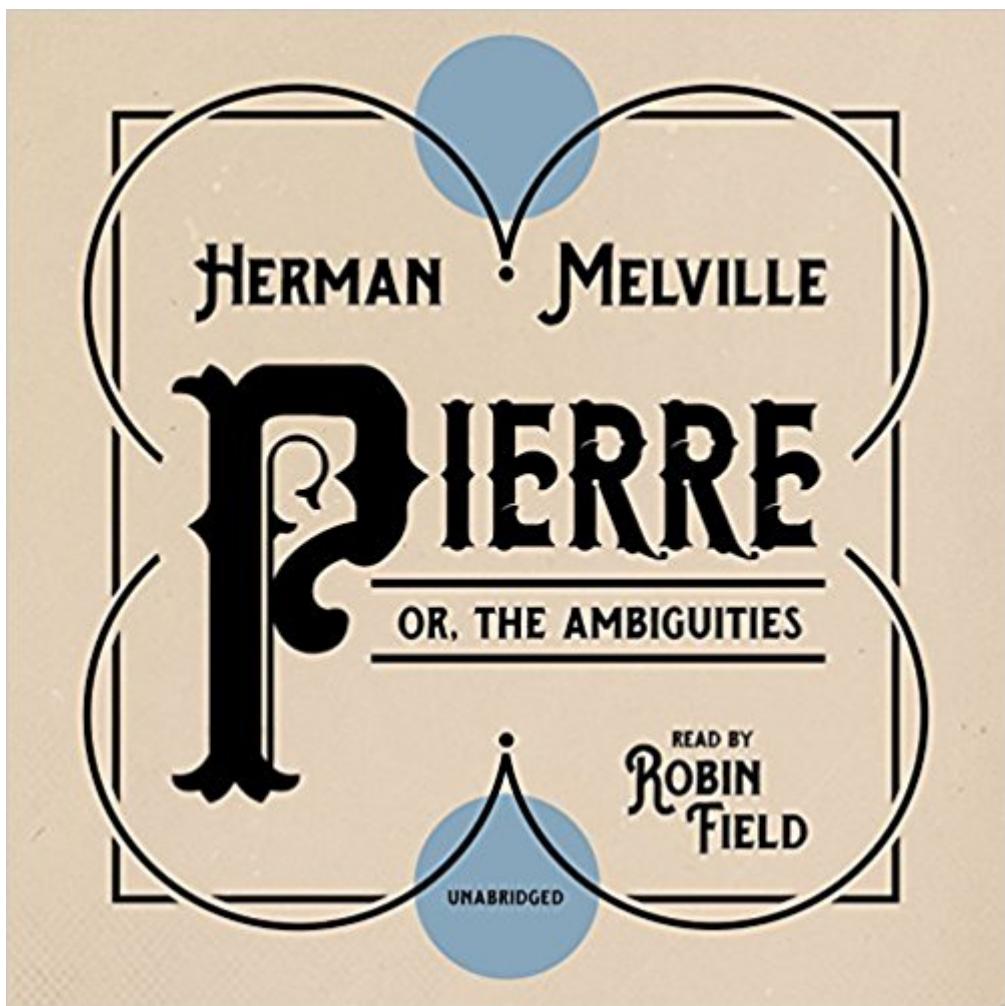


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Pierre: Or, The Ambiguities



Synopsis

Pierre Glendinning is the nineteen-year-old heir to the manor at Saddle Meadows in upstate New York. Engaged to the blonde Lucy Tartan in a match approved by his domineering mother, Pierre encounters the dark and mysterious Isabel Banford, who claims to be his half-sister, the illegitimate and orphaned child of his father and a European refugee. Driven by his magnetic attraction to Isabel, Pierre devises a remarkable scheme to preserve his father's name, spare his mother's grief, and give Isabel her proper share of the estate. First published in 1852, *Pierre* was condemned by critics of the time: "a dead failure," "this crazy rigmarole," and "a literary mare's nest." Latter-day critics, however, have recognized in the story of Melville's idealistic young hero a corrosive satire of the sentimental gothic novel and a revolutionary foray into modernist literary techniques.

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Customer Reviews

Herman Melville (1819-1891) was born in New York. Family hardships forced him to leave school for various occupations, including shipping as a cabin boy to Liverpool in 1839--a voyage that sparked his love for the sea. A shrewd social critic and philosopher in his fiction, he is considered an outstanding writer of the sea and a great stylist who mastered both realistic narrative and a rich, rhythmical prose.

This can be a difficult work, but it is beautiful. I can't tell you what it is about, because that is part of what it is about - the difficulty of communication.

I find myself in agreement with some of the more astute reviewers here that the critics, from Melville's contemporaries, to Updike, to Spengemann, who writes the Introduction to this Penguin Classics edition, have, to a one, got this book absurdly wrong. Describing Pierre's library, Melville writes, "Uppermost and most conspicuous among the books were the Inferno of Dante, and the Hamlet of Shakespeare." They are also, it seems to me almost a superfluity to mention, the books Melville most had in mind whilst penning this odd, ponderous work. All comparison to other writers and works - including Melville's own - only hinder the reader. The plot is indeed threadbare and trite, the dialogue is fusty and the narrative zigs and zags from extremity to extremity with no seeming order. - Actually, quoting Hamlet, "Seems, madam! Nay, it is;" - no real narrative thread to recount but that is tired and worn. The significance and worth of the book is what transpires in Pierre's mind, just as Hamlet would be nothing without his soliloquies. But the work is emphatically NOT philosophical, as the term is commonly understood, "Plato, and Spinoza, and Goethe, and many more belong to this guild of self-impostors...those impostor philosophers pretend somehow to have got an answer; which is as absurd, as though they should say they had got water out of a stone; for how can a man get a Voice out of Silence?" I suppose the word to describe it is psychological or epistemological, but it is the dark psychology of the Inferno and the epistemology of the doomed Dane. Everything in the perceptible world is indeed vertiginously ambiguous. As Pierre meditates in the early goings: "Not immediately, not for a long time, could Pierre fully, or by any approximation, realize the scene which he had just departed. But the vague revelation was now in him, that the visible world, some of which before had seemed but too common and prosaic to him, and but too intelligible, he now vaguely felt, that all the world, and every misconceivedly common and prosaic thing in it, was steeped a million fathoms in a mysteriousness hopeless of solution." In other words, Pierre discovers that he lives in a world of ambiguities so disorienting that coming to any sort of terms with it or its inhabitants is a lost, hopeless endeavour. The book is essentially a recounting of the soul plagued and blessed by intimations of another, spiritual realm and the loss of anything that measures up to them in what becomes, by the end of the book, an Inferno of ambiguities which our wildered 19th Century Hamlet is more than happy to depart. I do not say that the book measures up in its execution to the two works from which it takes its theme. The wonder is that the theme of our precarious position in this shape-shifting world is braved at all.

This is Melville's attempt at writing a domestic, almost American gothic novel in a distinctly Hawthornian vein. It doesn't work as such. He began it while elated and dreaming about the recognition he was going to finally receive from what he considered to be a masterpiece, which was

some book about a whale or something. When *Moby-Dick* flopped, Melville was hard at work on *Pierre*. The confidence he began the book with fizzles and, helped along by a preposterous deal forced on him by his publishers, the second half or so of the book is a bitter, misanthropic mess. Hershel Parker has restored what he calls the *Kraken* edition, which is the more coherent version he first brought to his publishers. This version is the one that was first published, and contains about 160 pages of additional material, including a tacked-on plot about *Pierre* being a writer, and some thinly veiled jabs at his publishers and former friends. It ends up reading like Edgar Allan Poe doing Jane Austen in one of his indignantly vengeful moods.

For decades I've read about how dreadful "*Pierre*" is. Everyone from Newton Arvin to John Updike seems to have given it the back of the hand. (I think it was Updike who claimed that at no other time in literary history has such a bad book followed on the heels of such a good one [the good one being "*Moby-Dick*"].) Admittedly, "*Pierre*" is very odd for a mid-nineteenth-century work -- so odd, in fact, that I'm surprised anyone even agreed to publish it. It starts out as a gothic but then about mid-way becomes a loose mixture of satire and philosophy, in much the same way that "*Mardi*" suddenly changes from seafaring adventure to satire/allegory. But throughout the book we find Melville's sharp insights and unique turns of phrase, while getting a view of 1850s America that's unique, to say the least. Penguin's Kindle edition of "*Pierre*" has very few typos and includes a linked table of contents, a good critical introduction, and helpful explanatory endnotes. For some reason, however, the endnotes are not linked or even indicated in the text. This oversight is hard to excuse, since Penguin charges top dollar for its Kindle editions.

The producer of this version did a fine job, as the text is very clean (lacking in scanning errors). As for the story, I was enthralled by it. It is deep, dark, and disturbing. I look forward to reading analyses of this text as I am confident that I did not discover all that Melville embedded in it. If you are about to read Melville for the first time, don't start with this one.

This is a romance to turn you celibate. Melville's worst.

I found this to be a much better Book Club selection than just a classic read. It is the tragic story of a young man who is naive in the world and his life quickly dissipates into ruin. Herman Melville published this novel a year after *Moby Dick*. I would not necessarily recommend it, but I thought it was an interesting work, especially if you are interested in the career of Melville.

A beautiful classic

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