CHAPTER 4

MELVILLE'S IDEAS OF ULTIMATE REALITY -

A DICHOTOMY BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL.
4. MELVILLE’S IDEAS OF ULTIMATE REALITY - A DICHOTOMY

BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL.

Herman Melville, like Cooper and Hawthorne, uses the conventions of the American Gothic, with a hero at the centre of the novel and a pair of heroines. In Mardi, the hero is Taji and the heroines Yillah and Hautia and in Pierre, the hero is Pierre and the heroines Lucy and Isabel. Like Cooper and Hawthorne, Melville too shows an ambivalence towards women, for he projects some of his inner conflicts through the portrayal of the heroines in 'fair' - 'dark' contrasts. But while Cooper and Hawthorne have represented their heroines as predominantly 'dark' or predominantly 'fair', Melville has portrayed each of his heroines with both the 'fair' and the 'dark' aspects in the same character. This is somewhat the pattern in Hawthorne’s The Marble Faun, wherein he has portrayed Hilda as a stereotype of the 'fair' aspect of innocence and purity like the New England ideal. But nevertheless she learns of evil by vicarious means when she witnesses a crime - a murder committed by her friends Miriam Donatello. Whereas with Cooper, the conflict is on a racial or religious plane, and with Hawthorne, it is between the religious past and present, with Melville, it is the complexity of the human mind with the motives of good and evil inextricably intertwined that is portrayed. To him, every mind was capable of both higher and baser instincts.
existing side by side. His characters faced the dilemma between the inner compulsions on a personal level and the external pressures of society - the struggle to define man's thoughts as good or evil or both. This is what surfaces through his ambivalence towards women in the two novels *Pierre, or the Ambiguities* and *Mardi, and A Voyage Thither*.

In *Pierre* and *Mardi*, there are pairs of women who represent the 'fair' - 'dark' contrasts. Hautia and Yillah are the polar opposites in *Mardi* and Lucy and Isabel, in *Pierre*. But though each seems to project either a 'fair' or a 'dark' aspect, on closer examination, we find that the 'fair' - 'dark' combination even exists side by side in each of these portrayals. The ambivalence towards these women shows a deep-rooted conflict in Melville's own mind about the real nature of man and his search for the ultimate truth. Melville's feeling was that man had to undergo all kinds of experiences in this search. Melville also felt that although it was not certain that man would succeed in his quest for truth, he had to undertake the quest all the same through experiences both at the personal and the social levels. It is the portrayal of the complexities of the human mind, the dichotomy between good and evil within the human heart that Melville is preoccupied with.

As it has been observed earlier, the idea of a mental catacomb crossed Hawthorne's mind when he wrote about Miriam.
in The Marble Faun. The same must have suggested itself to Melville, who considered the mind as the repository of both good and evil motives. Commenting on this aspect of Melville's writing, William Braswell writes in *Melville's Religious Thought*:

> It was the desire to learn all that the human mind can know about God and the Universe that led Melville first to explore the mind. It was the pursuit of truth that caused him to ignore the limits of human reason.  

So in a sense, Melville tried to find a reconciliation between what was intensely personal and what was significant in a social context. He felt that good as well as bad experiences were part of man's life and it was by going through all the experiences that man could finally choose what was capable of giving lasting happiness to him.

Melville too, like Cooper and Hawthorne, uses the 'dark' and 'fair' women as contrasts to project conflicting ideas like good and evil, evanescence and earthliness, innocence and experience, personal idealism and socially acceptable values. Melville's notion of inherent evil in the mind of man, that needs to be neutralized, stems from the Calvinistic notion of innate depravity in man. To him, this is also an in-escapable fact of life.

The Puritan ideas of Eve the temptress gave place to the idea of Eve in the Old world garden of Eden and as a

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contrast to this sprang up the notion of the 'new' Eve in the New World garden of Eden that nineteenth century America was visualized as. These two notions of women provided Melville with the 'dark' and 'fair' contrasts in his heroines. But unlike Cooper's and Hawthorne's heroines, each of these has both the 'fair' and 'dark' aspects in their characters and are projected as a subtle reflection of Melville's own preoccupation with conflicting ideas.

The ambivalence towards women in Melville's novels Pierre and Mardi leads one to examine Melville's own conflicts both as a writer and as a man. The conflict arose mainly because he had grown up with strict religious training but realized as an adult that the teachings that he had picked up from the religious texts could not be applied in real life. His own notions of the social traditions and changes around him in nineteenth century America were also taking shape in his adult mind. The result was a mixture of both the ideas he had unconsciously inculcated and those that he formulated consciously. Of these circumstances and resultant admixture of notions, Dr. Amina Amin in her dissertation entitled "A study of Herman Melville with special reference to the problem of evil", writes:

As Melville grew up and matured he gave up or revised many of the beliefs he had acquired early in life. This can specially be said about his religious training. But if his works are any indication they prove to what extent these factors influenced a
person who always looked for the Ideal or Absolute in things but was always disappointed because such an Ideal or Absolute did not exist.  

In Pierre, the heroines are Lucy and Isabel, the protagonist being Pierre himself, while in Mardi, they are Yillah and Hautia around Taji. The ambivalence towards these heroines through their portrayals as sometimes 'fair' and sometimes 'dark' in relation to the protagonist is a projection of a subconscious conflict of ideas. This conflict was between contrasting notions like good and evil, an innate sense of morality which is almost instinctive and a socially accepted idea of morality, innocence and experience, inheritance by virtue of social status and inheritance by virtue of one's personal effort and materialistic comfort and spiritual peace.

Mardi, and A Voyage Thither, is a sequel to his Polynesian adventure stories Typee and Omoo. In this novel, he writes in the first person as if the entire sequence of events were an extract of his own life's experiences. Taji, the hero, and Jarl his co-shipmate, are the only two who survive in a boat, when their ship 'Acturion' is destroyed at sea. They encounter two Polynesians Samoa and Annattoo on a ship that has no other occupant. Taji and Jarl make friends with Samoa and Annattoo and set sail. They reach the Mardi group of islands. On one of these, they meet a Pagan tribe whose priest Aleema is about to sacrifice a beautiful maiden called

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Yillah. Taji kills Aleema, but before he can take Yillah safely to his ship, she disappears. Then Taji, along with Jarl, Samoa and Annattoo, sets sail in search of Yillah. On the way, they meet King Media, Babbalanja, Yoomy and Mophi who join them on the quest. On the way, Jarl dies, and they are pursued by Aleema's sons at times, and the attendants of Hautia, a bewitching queen of a far-off land, at others. The search for Yillah proves futile but they are shown pursuing the search endlessly. Babbalanja, who is a wise seer, philosophizes, and in the course of his wise speeches, informs Taji that Yillah would elude him as he has been tainted with Aleema's blood. Taji's guilt here reminds us of Donatello's in Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*. Both of them are compelled to their respective crimes for the sake of the woman, each of them pursues. Taji kills for the sake of Yillah, and Donatello as a partner to Miriam. The only difference is that Donatello commits the crime due to the influence of Miriam whereas Taji does so because of his own innate compulsions.

In *Mardi*, which runs to several hundred pages, the theme is mainly the voyage through myriads of imaginary islands collectively called Mardi. But through the pages, Melville has woven the conflict between good and evil, as also other polarities through the use of the two heroines, who symbolize various polar opposites. Commenting on the theme
and characters of *Mardi*, William Braswell writes, in *Melville’s Religious Thought*:

The will represented by Taji, is the "rational appetite"; it has the power to choose between "such things as have been before judged and apprehended by the understanding". It is free to choose between what it conceives to be right and wrong. Two other important characters in the novel are Hautia the dark woman who symbolizes the vegetal soul, and Yillah, the fair, who symbolizes the spiritual soul.

Braswell writes that in the relationship between Taji and Yillah, "Melville represents the happiness that his rational appetite found in the spiritual soul". Yillah is personified as the epitome of beauty and perfection, almost ephemeral. The other woman Hautia is portrayed as an elusive figure too, but as one who is famed for her beauty and who tries desperately to bewitch Taji. Of Yillah, Melville vis-a-vis Taji, writes in *Mardi*:

> Often I thought that Paradise had overtaken me on earth, and that Yillah was verily an angel, and hence the mysteries that hallowed her.

Of Hautia, he writes in Taji’s words:

> Unseen, and unsolicited; still pursuing me with omens, with taunts, and with wooings, mysterious Hautia appalled me. Vaguely I began to fear her.

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5 Ibid., p. 313.
Hautia has her three attendants follow him and tempt him whenever they could, to their abode. Yillah, the 'fair' maiden, is described in the most glorious terms. She meekly awaits not only her fate, but deliverance of some sort, either in death or in freedom to go back to her land. Taji arrives in time to see her plight, but while he does set her free and is about to take her to his own ship, she disappears, never to be found again. At a later date, Taji learns from Babbalanja the wise one, that Yillah the 'pure' maiden eludes him because he had committed the sin of murdering Aleema. Taji describes Yillah thus:

Before me crouched a beautiful girl. Her hands were drooping. And, like a saint from a shrine, she looked sadly out from her long, fair hair.  

Yillah is the 'fair' maiden, the embodiment of purity, innocence and perfection. Melville seems to have shared the view along with Cooper and Hawthorne, that the ideal of womanhood consisted of qualities such as fairness of skin and hair, innocence, maidenly purity, angelic beauty and shyness which were associated with the New England Ideal and the WASP woman. While Cooper and Hawthorne describe this stereotype in detail, Melville only subtly alludes to the 'white' skin or blonde hair. When Taji kills Aleema, he comes to Yillah in the tent where she is imprisoned, and asks her not to be afraid of Aleema any more but to trust him.

6 Ibid., p.136.
(Taji). He reminds her that both of them are 'white' unlike the 'dusky' Aleema. He also reminds her of the time they had spent together in the garden of Eden that was Oroolia. This perhaps is Melville's allusion to Adam and Eve transformed into Taji and Yillah. He tells her:

Think not of him, sweet Yillah...Look on me...Am I not white like yourself? Behold, though since quitting Oroolia the sun has dyed my cheek, am I not even as you? Am I brown like the dusky Aleema?...shook we not the palm trees together, and chased we not the nuts down the glen?...In my home in Oroolia dear Yillah, I have a lock of your hair, 'ere yet it was golden, the dark little tress like a ring. How your cheeks were then changing from olive to white.  

Here, Melville represents both the 'fair' and the 'dark' aspects in Yillah by alluding to both the Eves of the Old and New World gardens of Eden. Yillah had been the 'olive' skinned, dark-haired maiden of Oroolia and had spent her years at an earlier age with Taji. Here, Melville refers to Yillah as unsuitable for the 'dusky' Aleema, in her present 'fair' form but having been Taji's companion at an earlier time when she had been 'olive-skinned'. The reference to Yillah as 'olive-skinned' as well as 'fair', portrays her as Eve the temptress as well as Eve the virgin. This is Taji's image of her as a dual personality - the 'fair' as well as 'dark'. This ambivalence towards Yillah represents Taji's own dilemma between the ideal he is seeking - the pure.

7 Ibid., p.143.
innocent Yillah, who has inspired him to act nobly and the other Yillah who has aroused the sensuous nature in him which he is unable to ignore – Yillah the enticing. This is Taji's conflict between nobility and depravity within his own heart; the 'good' that seeks to protect Yillah and her honour, and the evil that seeks Yillah sensually. Melville's own dilemma is reflected in Taji's conflict between man's innate depravity as against his striving to rise to nobler heights.

The memory that Taji rekindles in Yillah is of the original garden of Eden, possibly the European past beyond the Atlantic and the Yillah he now finds, is the transformed new Eve in the new garden of Eden, that is America. As regards this projection, Judith Fryer in The Faces of Eve, writes:

...The women in the novels of Hawthorne, Melville, Oliver Wendel Holmes...are not women at all, but images of women. They are reflections of the prevailing images of women in the nineteenth century...in the New World Gardens of their imaginations...Eve in the New World Garden, despite Adam's wish to ignore her, restrict her role or enshrine her on a pedestal, is the most important phenomenon in nineteenth century America.8

Taji seeks the changed 'fair-skinned' Yillah, the new Eve in the new garden of Eden, that is America. It is the 'white' American Adam seeking the 'white' American Eve of the nineteenth century. Yet Taji recalls the times together

when he was 'fairer' but she was olive-skinned. In the same Yillah, he now sees innocence, purity, maidenly virtues, 'fair' skin, 'fair' hair, and blue eyes, the picture of an ideal 'fair' woman, but he also recalls not with resentment but fondness, Yillah's days as an 'olive-skinned' maiden in Oroolia when she had been his companion. On the other hand, it is his 'brown' and 'dusky' colour that sets Aleema as inferior to Taji, in Melville's own words. This projects a dilemma in the mind of Taji - Melville, between Yillah in the Old world garden of Eden and Yillah in the New World garden of Eden, as to who he really wants. This may also be a reflection of Melville's own conflict between the various pairs of opposites that he harboured in his mind. The ambivalence in Melville's representations arises from not only the 'fair' and 'dark' aspects being portrayed through his heroines but the fact that both these polar opposites are found at once in the same heroine.

Taji is representative of the human mind which holds good as well as evil in its core. Babbalanja points out that the human mind is dichotomized when he talks of himself:

Well then ... upon that self-same inscrutable stranger, I charge all those past actions of mine, which in the retrospect appear to me such eminent folly, that I am confident, it was not I, Babbalanja, now speaking, that committed them.  

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Again he says of this 'stranger' within oneself:

...He is locked up in me. In a mask he dodges me. He prowls about in me, hither and thither; he peers, and I stare...so present is he always, that I seem not so much to live of myself, as to be a mere apprehension of the unaccountable being that is in me. Yet all the time, this being is I, myself.10

Babbalanja points out to Taji that his search for Yillah was lost because of his own crime - the murder of Aleema. It is a subtle allusion to Taji's real intention in rescuing Yillah - whether it was to protect her or to possess her. Aleema's murder not only has stained him but points out Taji's feelings towards Yillah as being edged with a deep desire, to possess her and to enjoy her sensuality. To quote Babbalanja's words to Taji:

Aleema's sons raved not; 'tis true, then, Taji, that an evil deed gained you your Yillah, no wonder she is lost 11

Again he tells Taji:

...Taji I for Yillah thou wilt hunt in vain; she is a phantom that but mocks thee; and while for her thou madly huntest, the sin thou didst cries out, and its avengers still will follow...wise counsel take. Within our hearts is all we seek; though in that search many need a prompter...Then rove no more. Gain now, in flush of youth, that last wise thought, too often purchased, by a life of woe ...12

10 Ibid., p.457.
11 Ibid., p.423.
12 Ibid., p.637.
In Yillah, Taji outwardly sees innocence and purity which make her out to be a 'phantom', a supernatural being. At the same time he sees in her an earthly being - an 'Eve' who had been with him amidst the "palm" groves of Oroolia. She is a stereotype of Eve in the Old World/garden of Eden and Eve of the New World, the 'dark' and the 'fair' stereotypes in one, as she appears to Taji. This dual appeal of Yillah as both Eve the temptress and Eve the virgin, or the Old World Eve and the New World Eve, representing both innocence and experience, heavenly and earthly aspects in the human mind, occurring side by side, accounts for the ambivalence towards her. It is the "split - heroine" motif, to quote Dr. Amina Amin, the 'fair' and 'dark' aspects occurring side by side in the same individual albeit unconsciously. This dilemma is further projected in the fact that while Taji initially has only the intention of rescuing Yillah, his later desire is to possess her bodily, and this causes him to murder Aleema, her captor. But once again, when Babbalanja explains that it was pointless to pursue Yillah and reminds Taji of his 'sin', Taji tries to seek Yillah in the "watery world" and to sublimate his passionate nature. This is a projection of Melville's unconscious preoccupation with the co-existence of conflicting notions in the human mind and his own too.

Melville tells us that Yillah is a Polynesian girl but he describes her as of "snow-white skin; blue, firmament eyes;
As an explanation, he writes in Taji's words:

After endeavoring ...to account for these things, I was led to imagine, that the damsel must be an Albino (Tulla)...These persons are of exceedingly delicate white skin, tinted with a faint rose hue, like the lips of a shell. Their hair is golden, but, unlike the Albinos of other climes, their eyes are invariably blue, and no way intolerant of light.14

Melville here has projected the New England WASP stereotype in features and transported her to the imaginary Pacific island. She is at once the 'sexless', 'sinless blonde' the "pure spirit looking down into" Taji's "soul".

During the brief time Taji spends with Yillah in Odo, he wonders if she is of this earth. He says:

...day by day, did her spell weave round me its magic, and all the hidden things of her being grew more lovely and strange. Did I commune with a spirit? Often I thought that Paradise had overtaken me on earth, and that Yillah was verily an angel, and hence the mysteries that hallowed her.15

And yet she had been Taji's companion in Oroolia an earthly, mortal, 'olive-skinned' maiden. Both these images were reflections of Taji's mental states. The image of Yillah as both mortal, and immortal, earthly and supernatural,

13 Ibid., p.126.
14 Ibid., p.153.
15 Ibid., p.193.
'dark' and 'fair', Old World Eve and New World Eve makes for an ambivalence towards her.

To obtain Yillah, Taji would have to rise above the normal human weaknesses pertaining to the flesh and transcend to a higher ideal in life. He would have to search incessantly for the ultimate perfection — and happiness in life. Taji would have to rise above his passions and baser impulses, but he could do this only through reason. As William Braswell notes in _Melville's Religious Thought:_

He (Melville) was aware of the doctrine that the everlasting, the unchangeable truth is to be attained only through reason unhindered by the body. 16

Hence Yillah, the ideal that Taji is seeking, will be unattainable as long as he is immersed in sensual pleasures. Melville seems to be suggesting that it is an ideal that is possible in the New World in the nineteenth century with a change in the values in society but which was an impossibility earlier. The ideal is man's discovery of his inner universe, the spirit of nobility and divinity within him but this could always remain just out of reach as Yillah remained, for Melville's Taji. To reach this, man would have to go through the experiences of life, come face to face with his innate nature that consists of both 'good' and 'evil', and search within himself for the Absolute. William Ellery Sedgwick

in his book *Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind* opines that *Mardi* has for its theme the human mind's quest for truth and that the human mind looks two ways; outwardly at the objective truth about creation and inwardly at the realities of being.\(^\text{17}\)

Thus Yillah is represented as the 'fair' maiden who is so innocent, child-like and pure that she can evoke nobility and lofty thoughts in the heart of anyone who would seek her. Even Aleema thinks of sacrificing her so that she can go back to the world of spirits in Oroalia, where she came from. But Yillah also arouses Taji's passion for him to want her physically. The ambivalence stems from the fact that Taji the Adam is still enamoured of Yillah and this desire obstructs his rise to spiritual heights.

What had gone on, since the advent of the Founding Fathers in America in the form of pioneering, colonizing and subduing of nature and the weaker sections such as the American Indians and the Negroes, was a matter to be best forgotten but yet could not be. It was this rapacious nature of American expansionism and pioneering as against an urge towards an idealistic society that confronted Melville and many of his contemporaries including Cooper and Hawthorne. The notion of the ultimate Utopia seemed both a possibility.

and an impossibility to Melville. There is a touch of opti-
mism as well as pessimism in Yillah's portrayal - the attainable,
yet the unattainable ideal. She is tangible and human as
well as elusive and ephemeral.

Hautia is the 'dark' woman and the symbol of passion, and
a clear antithesis to Yillah. If Yillah is 'fair' haired,
Hautia is 'dark' haired, if Yillah is 'fair', Hautia is 'dark'.
Both are beautiful, and yet Taji rejects one but pursues another.
When Taji kills Aleema, it was out of his desire for Yillah,
hidden though it is, and he rejects Hautia as "that wild
witch" whom he condemns. He would not "turn back for Hautia",
he declares to Media. Taji can accept the temptress image of
one but not the other. This may be the reason for the ambi-
valence towards Hautia in portraying her as beautiful but be-
witching, as a temptress but not as acceptable as Yillah. And
yet, to find Yillah the pure maiden, he has to accept Hautia
the temptress and her attentions. Hautia thus is inescapable
as she is part of his own inner self - his potential for
baser instincts which had to be overcome - to have even a glimpse
of the spirit that was Yillah. This may be Melville's projec-
tion of his own dilemma between sensuality as a compulsive bio-
logical function and its rejection as a way to one's spiritual
self. Referring to this unavoidable relationship between the
'vegetal soul' and the spiritual soul, or the flesh and spirit,
William Braswell writes in Melville's Religious Thought:

The influence of . . . empirical philosophers
. . . is . . . reflected in Melville's representa-
tions of the spiritual faculty as held cap-
tive by the body... Her (Yillah's) relation-
ship to the sensual woman Hautia, "the vortex that draws all in", is significant, since Hautia is the symbol of the vegetal soul. At the end of his voyage around the archipelago, Taji comes to the island of Hautia, who has sought from the beginning to tempt him. There he is led to conclude that in "some wild way Hautia had made a captive of Yillah".18

Hautia symbolizes the 'dark woman and Melville describes her as one whose "crescent brow" was "calm as the moon, when most it works its evil influences".19 Of Hautia, Taji says:

Her eye was fathomless. But the same mysterious evil-boding gaze was there, which long before had haunted me (Taji) in Odo, ere Yillah fled ... she stood motionless; radiant and scentless; a dahlia on its stalk.20

Finally when Taji defies Hautia and calls her a "vipress", she angrily condemns him to join Yillah in death in "a cavern below". Taji seems to see something vaguely like Yillah's white body but before he can either identify it or join it, he is rescued by his companions and so, comes out of his stupor. Thus even while projecting Hautia as the evil woman to be shunned, Melville does not say whether by "sinning" with Hautia, Taji could have recovered Yillah. Also Melville subtly alludes to the fact that although Taji tried to keep away from Hautia, the temptress, she forced him to seek her probably because he still had a subconscious desire for her. Again, the beauty

20 Ibid., p. 646.
of Hautia is 'dark' and tempting while that of Yillah being now 'fair' is elevating. Taji leads Yillah to believe that she had been Taji's willing companion as long as she had been 'olive-skinned'. Thus the subconscious notions on women superimposed on a conflict of values surface with the projection of Yillah as one who evokes the baser as well as higher instincts in Taji. While Yillah is sought after by Taji, Hautia seeks Taji; and while Yillah flees Taji, Taji flees Hautia. But in the final reckoning, Taji has to encounter Hautia and all that she stands for, in order to reach the Absolute Truth that is Yillah. This again is because Taji has to overcome his passion by quelling it or sublimating it or coming to terms with it, before he can discover higher sentiments in his heart. This is also because Melville wishes to project the duality of man's personality wherein both passion and higher values exist side by side.

To Melville, land stood for empirical truth and the ocean for introspection and experience. In Mardi, Melville portrays Yillah as symbolic of land as well as ocean and Hautia as symbolic of the ocean alone. When Yillah was the "dusky" companion of Taji, she lived in the land of Oroolia, but now she had disappeared in the depths of the ocean. She had to be rescued from the deep "watery world" and restored to her native "Amma". Thus she represents experience and the resultant truth that dawns. Hautia on the other hand, represents the ocean, the symbol of experience and introspection and the fact that Hautia holds Yillah captive may be Melville's allusion to the fact.
that man, represented by Taji, has to undergo experiences and introspect deeply and compulsively if he hopes to attain his ideal or truth. Of Hautia, Melville says:

...Hautia. A gorgeous Amaryllis in her hand; circe-flowers in her ears; her girdle tied with vervain. She came by privet hedges, drooping...She glided on; her crescent brow calm as the moon, when most it works its evil influences...Her eye was fathomless. 21

Hautia is the ‘dark’ woman, the temptress who tries to attract Taji to come to her island. She is enchantingly beautiful, but her "fathomless gaze" is also cold and inscrutable. William Braswell tells us that Hautia represents the vegetal soul which holds the spiritual soul in servility. This is the significance of Taji’s conclusion that Hautia had somehow made Yillah her captive. To quote Braswell in Melville’s Religious Thought:

Melville suggests that what he at first conceived to be the spiritual soul derives from and is held in bondage by the vegetal soul. 22

The vegetal soul is the physical self with the desires of the flesh as an irrevocable part. At the same time, the spiritual soul is the inmost core, or spirit body residing within, and as a part of the physical body. This is the dual nature of the physical-spiritual, earthly-heavenly or

21 Ibid., p.646
tangible-intangible twin factors occurring side by side
and yet of one being dominated by another that Melville
projects in his ambivalence towards Hautia and Yillah re-
presented as the 'dark'-'fair' opposites. This ambivalence,
reflecting equality as well as disparity between the holds
of the flesh and spirit over man's mind, may be a projection
of Melville's indecision about the cause of man's ultimate
happiness - materialistic utopia or the overcoming of man's
innate passions, to realize the higher values of life.

This conflict may have arisen also because Melville was
unable to decide on the reality of man's innate nature, the
influence of his environment. If Yillah's portrayal is a
portrayal of Melville's indecision between hope and despair,
earthliness and spirituality, flesh and spirit, Hautia's
portrayal is a reflection of the conflict between acceptance
and rejection of desire in man's mind. This conflict arises
out of the temptation that desire causes and the avoidance
of which can lead to spiritual growth. Hautia presents the
evil element that tries to tempt Taji and which he tries to
avoid. Even in the final stages of the novel, Melville
shows Taji to be grappling with the temptation that Hautia
poses and finds himself in a dilemma between rejecting
her and losing Yillah or accepting her to attain Yillah.

As Charles J. Haberstroh Jr., in Melville and Male
Identity, points out:

Yillah...does not represent in Taji any
urge to come together with a real woman
possessing an articulated identity and actual connections to an actual world, but rather the need to find some pliable female form on to which he can project his own visionary desires.23

The ambivalence towards Yillah and Hautia, stems from a conflict between real and visionary desires, real and imaginary worlds, actual and physical realms of life, flesh and spirit, head as the seat of reason and heart as the seat of passions, both separate and yet one entity - complimenting each other, while standing as polar opposites.

The conflict, as many biographers have felt is one that arose from the fact that Melville could not find a resolution to his dilemma between the inadequacies he felt in his personal life. As Charles J. Haberstroh Jr. says aptly:

'Nardi'...reminds less some fictional garden of true love's glories, than it does a battle-field for deep seated ambivalences in Melville over familial and even sexual matters that his marriage appears only to have exacerbated rather than resolved.24

Referring to the 'light' and 'dark' contrasts that project the writer's own conflicts, Harry Levin writes in:

The Power of Blackness:

Without necessarily likening our writers to Fathers of the Church, we are bound

24 Ibid., pp. 53-4.
to see darkness combining with splendour in their depiction. Clearly the whole truth is large enough to encompass both extremes. That is why at every level, our loyalties waver so ambivalently between two worlds: the new and the old, the present and the past, society and the self, nature and the supernatural. 25

Also, as a plausible explanation to this use of woman as a symbol, sometimes as the ‘fair’ and sometimes as the ‘dark’, which projects polarities, Charles J. Haberstroh Jr. in Melville and Male Identity, writes:

It appears that Melville had in Elizabeth his first real shock of discovery that, as a wife, a woman could be a seeming angel of purity and model of safe domestic solicitude, while at the same time being a willing participant in, and temptation to, what Melville felt were the destructive turmoils of sexuality. 26

Pierre, or the Ambiguities is Melville’s study of man’s conflict between personal idealism and social expediency. The dilemma arises out of man’s dependence on one or the other while seeking a justification for his actions. What seems justifiable at the personal level, does not seem so at the social level and vice-versa. This then is the conflict that gets reflected through Melville’s ambivalence towards women in Pierre.


Pierre is the only son of Mrs. Mary Glendinning, his father having passed away while he was quite young. There is just a single lingering memory from his father's deathbed, and that is of a daughter, Pierre's sister, recalled by his father. As a young man, Pierre is betrothed to Lucy Tartan, a lovely young girl, of equal social status. At his aristocratic home "Saddle Meadows", Pierre grows up until this point of life with the secure knowledge of his mother and Lucy as the two women in his life. Then he learns that the daughter that his father had referred to, and whose unknown image, he had carried in his subconscious, is not just a fragment of memory, but a reality. She is Isabel Banford, the illegitimate daughter of Mr. Glendinning, Pierre's father and a French refugee woman he had lived with, but not married. She lives in servitude at "Saddle Meadows", and writes of her identity to Pierre in a letter thus:

Pierre Glendinning, thou art not the only child of thy father; in the eye of the sun, the hand that traces this is thy sister's; yes, Pierre, Isabel calls thee her brother - her brother! Oh sweetest of words, which so often I have thought to myself, and almost deemed it profanity for an outcast like me to speak or think. Dearest Pierre, my brother, my own father's child! 27

Pierre knows that Isabel will never be accepted by Mary Glendinning. So he decides to break away from her

and to announce that he had secretly married Isabel.

This is initially an act of charity by Pierre to give her social status and respectability, while preserving his father's respectable image in society too. Pierre is dis-inherited by his mother and since he is not sure of Lucy's reaction, leaves without meeting her but only informing her of his whereabouts through a letter. Pierre discovers that his concern for his half-sister has turned into a physical passion for her, and he shares an incestuous relationship with her. He tries to earn his livelihood in town and learns in the meantime that Lucy is engaged to be married to his cousin Glendinning Stanley. But Lucy surprises him by joining him in town. Pierre now leads his life with Isabel, and with Lucy too, who is unaware that he is actually Isabel's brother. Glen, Pierre's cousin, learns of this and accosts Pierre. In the scuffle that ensues, Pierre kills Glen and goes to prison. He is followed by Isabel and Lucy. Lucy learns that Pierre and Isabel are actually brother and sister and dies of shock. This brings Pierre to the reality of his unnatural relationship with Isabel and he forces her to share with him the poison she has carried with her.

Melville has portrayed Lucy as the 'fair' maiden and Isabel as the 'dark'. In addition there is his mother, Mary Glendinning who plays an important role in his growing years. Pierre grows up with not only a faint memory of a sister, his dying father had alluded to, but sharing an
unnatural relationship with his mother, Mary Glendinning. Mary insists on being called 'Sister Mary' by the son while she calls him 'Brother' in her turn. This somehow satisfies the mother in letting her feel youthful, but it also nurtures an unnatural bond between the mother and the son. Pierre grows up, not really understanding either his relationship to his mother in the capacity of a son, or to a potential sister he might have had. Pierre thus is in a psychological predicament, and when he sees the reality of a flesh-and-blood sister, he is unable to prevent superimposing his experience on his natural innocence. Referring to this unnatural relationship as the possible cause of Pierre's unnatural relationship later with Isabel, Melville writes:

...possibly the latent germ of Pierre's proposed extraordinary mode of executing his proposed extraordinary resolve - namely, the nominal conversion of a sister into a wife, might have been found in the previous conversational conversion of a mother into a sister. 28

In the course of growing up, the natural mother-son relationship becomes so obscure, that Pierre develops an almost jealous and unnatural attachment towards her. Of this strange relationship and the turn it takes in Pierre's mind Melville writes:

Pierre was the only son of an affluent and haughty widow. But a reverential

28 Ibid., p. 208.
and devoted son seemed lover enough for this
campaign Bloom; and besides all this, Pierre
when namelessly annoyed by the too ardent
admiration of the handsome youths ... had ...
openly sworn, that the man graybeard or
beardless - who should dare to propose
marriage to his mother, that man would ...
immediately disappear from the earth. 29

Melville further tells us that this filial love of
Pierre was fully reciprocated by the mother and that Pierre
"seemed to meet her half-way by bringing himself to the
'mature standpoint' in Time when his pedestal mother had
so long stood." 30

Pierre is engaged to be married to Lucy Tartan, a very
beautiful innocent young girl from a socially well-standing
family. Lucy is the 'fair' woman of the novel and exalting
her beauty, Melville writes:

...there always will be beautiful women
in the world, yet the world will never
see another Lucy Tartan. Her cheeks were
tinted with the most delicate White and
red, the white predominating. Her eyes
some God brought down from heaven, her
hair was Danae's spangled with Joe's
shower, her teeth were dived for in the
Persian seas. 31

Melville at the same time brings out the evanescent
quality by this description of Lucy:

At this moment, Lucy ... was hovering
near the door; the setting sun streaming

29 Ibid., pp. 24-5.
30 Ibid., p. 25.
31 Ibid., pp. 45-6.
through the window, bathed her whole form in golden loveliness and light...that wonderful...transparency of her clear Welsh complexion, now fairly glowed like rosy snow...Pierre almost thought that she could only part by floating out of the open window...with an indescribable gayety, buoyancy, fragility and an unearthly evanescence.32

Her guilelessness becomes evident, when she tells Pierre to 'read' her 'through and through' as she has no secrets. Lucy loves Pierre ardently and he reciprocates her love. But Pierre at the same time, feels a dual emotion towards Lucy just as Taji did towards Yillah in Mardi. He too feels both a sense of protection towards Lucy and a sense of possession towards her. The only difference is that he is afraid about 'ravishing' Lucy. He is unable to accept his role as her husband in a normal relationship. He feels that she is too 'pure' and saintly a being to be married to. The business of marriage to so pure a maiden puts him off. He finds it easier to be just engaged to her. Melville expresses Pierre's thoughts about marriage to Lucy thus:

I to wed this heavenly fleece? Methinks one husbandly embrace would break her airy zone, and she exhale upward to that heaven whence she hath hither come, condensed to mortal sight. It cannot be, I am of heavy earth, and she of airy light. By heaven, but marriage is an impious thing.33

32 Ibid., p.83.
33 Ibid., p.83.
The ambivalence towards Lucy stems from Pierre's inability to accept her as a woman whom he is about to marry as he is not sure whether she should be worshipped as a heavenly being or accepted as a human being. His dilemma is between a normal relationship in marriage and the idea of ravaging Lucy's virginity.

Pierre now meets Isabel accidentally. Isabel knows who he is but he does not know her. When she informs him through a letter that she is the illegitimate daughter of his late father and a French refugee, the image of the 'sister' that he had nurtured, since his father's death, merges with this real person. Melville brings in the element of pathos about Isabel's character - a certain helplessness. She writes to Pierre out of a sense of despondency and a desire to inform him of her relationship to him. Isabel apparently confides in Pierre with the words:

Oh, my brother, my dear, dear Pierre, - help me, fly to me; see, I perish without thee; ...here I freeze in the wide, wide world; - no father, no mother, no sister, no brother, no living thing in the fair form of humanity, that holds me dear. No more, Oh no more, dear Pierre, can I endure to be an outcast in the world for which the dear Saviour died.34

Isabel writes so, because she feels compelled to open up to the only close relative she knows of. Yet Melville represents her as a mysterious heroine, as a contrast to Lucy thus:

The girl sits sewing steadily...her preternatural calmness sometimes seems only

34 Ibid., p.89.
made to cover the intensest struggle in her bosom. Her unadorned and modest dress in black; fitting close upto her neck; and clasping it with a plain velvet border...elastically contracting and expanding as though some choked, violent thing were risen up there within from the teeming region of her heart...she lifts her whole marvellous countenance...and for one swift instant, that face of supernaturalness unreservedly meets Pierre's.

Isabel is shown to be very emotional, with a 'violent thing' striving to come out of the heart. There is the depiction of a sensuous nature in Isabel's suggestive of something sinister and 'dark'. This contrasts with Lucy's 'unearthly evanescence' that suggests her ephemeral and 'light' aspect. If Lucy wears white, Isabel wears black. Lucy's complexion is 'fair Welsh' as contrasted with Isabel's 'dark olive', her hair "golden" as against Isabel's 'dark'. This is only Melville's superficial portrayal of the two heroines. Actually the implications of both the 'fair' and 'dark' aspects are found in each of them.

In Lucy the 'fair-dark' contrast appears in the form of an acceptance - rejection contrast standing for fear of causing a blemish on her virginity as against wishing a normal marital relationship. In Isabel this 'fair-dark' contrast takes the form of a guilt-commitment contrast standing for his innate sensuousness that makes him live.

35 Ibid., pp 70-1.
incestuously with Isabel, and a sense of moral duty towards Isabel, as well as his father that makes him want to protect her in the guise of a husband. Isabel and Pierre alone share the knowledge of their relationship as brother and sister. Pierre wishes to keep the illegitimacy of Isabel's birth a secret and his father's image in the eyes of the society, untarnished. So he decides at first, on the only solution he can think of, to annul the guilt feeling in him for Isabel's forlorn condition and to honour the commitment he owes to her - to live with her as her husband. This later turns into a real relationship when Pierre is unable to resist his desire for her. He feels his altruism replaced by or cloaked by his innate sensuousness.

Isabel feels naturally close to Pierre, being his sister. When Pierre sees her for the first time, she recognizes him but he does not. She sees the brother in him and a link to their father. Though Melville perhaps intends to portray her as a temptress, he also creates a picture of a pitiable young woman who seeks to feel wanted and to belong somewhere. If she reflects a passionate nature, she also reflects an emotionally charged temperament which is ready to burst at the sight of her one and only living relative, Pierre. If she is Eve the temptress, she is also someone's sister and her intentions could be innocent enough to make her look Pierre 'unreservedly'. This suggestion of a double image of Isabel is actually, Pierre's or Melville's own conflict between the real and the illusory.
Besides her own intentions, Melville has portrayed Isabel as being responsible for evoking the noblest of sentiments and intentions in Pierre, as well as the baser ones in him. Of her being the cause of bringing out Pierre's highest feelings for a fellow human being, Melville writes:

She (Isabel) had impressed him as the glorious child of Pride and Grief, in whose countenance were traceable the divinest lineaments of both her parents. Pride gave to her her nameless nobleness; Grief touched that nobleness with an angelic softness; and again that softness was steeped in a most charitable humility, which was the foundation of her loftiest excellence of all.36

Pierre, as we see later, is drawn to Isabel as a brother as well as a lover, the latter role slowly gaining ground until Pierre can only push the real relationship to the furthest corner of his heart and give way to his incestuous relationship. He is in a position similar to Mardi's Tajji, whereby side by side with his intentions to protect Isabel in the real capacity of a brother, he is unconsciously drawn to her physically. One wonders whether in taking the role of husband to Isabel, the intentions of Pierre are wholly altruistic. Pierre seems to do it for the sake of upholding her status and of hiding his father's illegal liaison with a French refugee and Isabel's real identity; but unconsciously there lurks a passion for her deep down in his heart. This results in an ambivalence towards Isabel.

36 Ibid., p. 204.
Looking at it in another way, Pierre would pretend marriage for the sake of elevating Isabel in the eyes of society and at the same time keep his father's illegitimate connection a secret. Here, Melville brings to the fore, Pierre's nobility that caused Pierre to sacrifice his inner peace for the happiness of Isabel and the fulfilment of a son's duty to his father. But the fact that Pierre is drawn to his mother unnaturally, and to his half-sister incestuously, and that he is unable to accept Lucy in the very natural relationship of marriage, brings out an ambivalence towards these two women, which Melville expresses through Pierre's predicament or experience. Referring to Pierre's dilemma about his relationships, Milton R. Stern in The Fine Hammered Steel of Herman Melville comments:

Pierre's constant brother-sister, mother-child, and cousin-cousin relationships are one with the Encaladus-incest motif... coelus and Terra, heaven and earth are one; ... Melville never presents sex and genesis without tying them in some way to the convenient symbols of Adam and Noah—all mankind is one. All the children of "the sons of Adam" and the "irresistible daughters of Eve" are one. Thus all relationships are incestuous, inward-bearing and outward-driving at once. 37

Thus the basic conflict in Melville stemming from a dilemma between social expediency and commitment and the truth of human relationships, which seemed an intensely personal

experience, was one reason for the ambivalence towards the portrayal of Lucy and Isabel.

When Isabel reveals her identity as Pierre's half-sister, she appears to Pierre, as a kind of phantom. She seems to be associated with the portrait of his father as a gay bachelor and she appears to him as in a vision. Referring to Pierre's mental co-relation between Isabel's face and his father's, Melville writes:

And now, by irresistible intuitions, all that had been inexplicably mysterious to him in the portrait, and all that had been inexplicably familiar in the face, most magically these now coincided; ...by some ineffable correlation, they reciprocally identified each other, and, as it were, melted into each other, and this...unifying, presented lineaments of an added supernaturalness.38

Pierre feels as if he had known Isabel, like his own soul. She is at once a tangible physical person and an intangible, evanescent, illusory being. Referring to this conflict in Pierre, Charles Feidelson Jr., in Symbolism and American Literature, writes:

Pierre's father is represented by two portraits, one showing a middle aged married man, the other a gay bachelor...The transfiguration of his father is completed when the two portraits merge with a third - the visionary countenance of Isabel, which he cannot drive from his mind...He takes the course of the artist, he effects a metamorphic fusion between the image of his father and the image of his supposed sister.39

Melville brings out a supernatural quality about Isabel's dark beauty. She is very human and yet she conjures up an unfathomable inscrutability about her person. She kindles great nobility and compassion in Pierre but she also inadvertently kindles the fire of unnatural passion in him. If her sudden appearance which is apparition-like, is one that haunts Pierre, her sensuous looks are earthly and irresistible too. Of this ambivalent response in Pierre, Judith Fryer in her book The Faces of Eve writes:

Isabel's theme song is "Isabel and Mystery". When she first plays it for Pierre on her guitar, he feels a strange wild heat upon his brow and rushes from the room, all thought of what he had come to tell her driven from his mind. He feels bewitched, enchanted...he is magnetically drawn to her by forces he cannot control, and the attraction is both a need to penetrate her mystery and an inability to resist her vibrant sexuality.  

Fryer even suggests that Isabel's relationship to Pierre as his half-sister is also not verifiable as it is also based on what Isabel herself says. She rightly argues:

Is she his sister? Not even Pierre can say, for although she resembles the "chair portrait" of his youthful father, so does she resemble the portrait of an unknown European man.  

This suggestion may be what Melville intended too - that the relationship was also accepted at first by Pierre in

41 Ibid., p.50.
good faith. But this faith may have been gradually and subconsciously eroded by a feeling of skepticism and rationalization for his being physically drawn to her. This ambivalence would be a result of a subconscious conflict in the mind of Pierre - Melville between what was real and what was imaginary, between tangibility of human relationships and their intangibility and between personal and social norms. Melville thus expresses an ambivalence towards Isabel in representing her as both flesh and spirit, natural and supernatural, myth and reality, sister as well as wife.

In Lucy Tartan, Melville portrays the 'fair' maiden who is betrothed to Pierre but when Isabel comes into Pierre's life, she is rejected. About this rejection of Lucy, and acceptance of Isabel, Judith Fryer writes:

Lucy is the girl Pierre would take to be his wife and treats like his sister. Isabel is the girl he takes to be his sister and treats like his wife.42

Fryer also points out that Isabel's "juxtaposition with Lucy certainly points up her vibrant life in general and her sexuality in particular, in contrast to Lucy's saintly, virginal and ethereal qualities" 43

Lucy, as has been noted, is extraordinarily beautiful, and she is Melville's 'fair' woman. She has the "Welsh complexion" and "flaxen hair" - Melville's idea as also of

42 Ibid., p.51.
43 Ibid., p.49.
Cooper's and Hawthorne's, of an ideal White American woman. As long as Pierre is an innocent young man at Saddle Meadows, he is able to accept Lucy as his betrothed. Then when he meets Isabel, he is able to accept her as his sister and wants to make up for all that she had undergone as an orphan. But, the moment he comes to the city, he begins to live with Isabel as her husband. Of his innocence turning into unconscious desire, at first while at Saddle Meadows and later into experience in the city, Melville writes:

So choicely, and in some degree, secludedly nurtured, Pierre though now arrived at the age of nineteen, had never yet become so thoroughly initiated into that darker, though truer aspects of things, which an entire residence in the city from the earliest period of life, almost inevitably engraves upon the mind of any keenly observant and reflective youth of Pierre's present years.44

The ambivalence towards both Lucy and Isabel arises because they inspire opposite feelings in Pierre. Lucy is engaged to be married to Pierre, but the latter is afraid of violating her purity and innocence. Isabel is his half-sister whom, he wants to protect from social ostracism but in so doing he becomes a victim of his own hidden sexual impulses.

He wants to marry her and lead a normal life with her

as her husband. But at the same time, he is afraid to 'ravish' her innocence, afraid he may be a corrupting influence over her 'pure' and 'maidenly' character. She stands for the New England ideal that needs to be preserved in her pristine purity and therefore cannot be violated.

Isabel's relationship as Pierre's half-sister, seems a reality to Pierre but there is the other social reality at stake - that of his father's reputation, if this private reality were made known to everyone. At the same time, while the social reality of a fraternal relationship with Isabel needs to be morally strengthened, the private reality that is known only to him and Isabel is that he is incestuously involved with her. The dilemma between public norms and privateones and between social conventions and personal convictions, is projected in the portrayal of both Isabel and Lucy, accounting for the ambivalence towards them.

Pierre is not able to come to terms with the personal reality of what Isabel is and what she means to him, or what Lucy is, and what she is rejected for. At the same time, he is not able to come to terms with his social obligations and commitments to Isabel, Lucy, his mother or his father. To him, Isabel's forlorn condition which he has to alleviate, as well as his duty to keep his father's name unbesmirched, seem very intense, personal needs. This can happen only if he holds on to his idealism. But in clinging to that idealism,
he loses all sense of social co-ordination or perspective, because of his inner turmoil which is also intensely personal. He realizes that in the course of his obligation to his mother and Isabel, he loses his inner balance. He is caught between his personal obsessions and that which is socially unacceptable. From what Melville's biographers have said, this is not Pierre's dilemma, but a reflection of Melville's own.

His relationships with his mother, sister as well as his wife were complex and abnormal. While Melville's biographical aspect can only be conjectured, Pierre the protagonist's unnatural and abnormal relationships with his mother, beloved and half-sister, the three women in his life, project a sense of incompatibility between his personal idea of morals and the public notion of it.

When Pierre decides to move to the town with Isabel, he forcibly turns away from both his mother as well as his beloved. He feels that his mother would not approve of Isabel, for socio-economic reasons, even if she did not know of her real identity. He also feels guilty about revealing to Lucy, his so-called secret marriage to Isabel and feels that she may not accept it. But Lucy joins Pierre and Isabel, thus surprising Pierre by her acceptance of the 'marriage' and opts to stay close to Pierre. While this seems to be the outcome of Lucy's extreme love for Pierre, which makes her
follow him wherever he goes, it also reflects Melville's suggestion of a sterile relationship between Pierre and Lucy. This is what Leslie A. Feidler calls the 'sinless blonde' concept with sinlessness and a dis-association of natural and normal sex relationship where the White American maiden is concerned.

Chase writes of this complexity of Melville thus:

Melville's relationship with his mother, sisters and his wife, is understood to have remained an ideal, adolescent one, as a consequence of which he felt repelled when he tried to confront it as an adult. 45

It is this same dilemma that finds expression in Pierre in the form of Melville's ambivalence towards Lucy and Isabel. Pierre the protagonist, is unable to understand his idealism in the perspective of his life as a social being. This conflict between what is socially true and what is personally true, what is moral by social standards and what, by one's own standards, is what Melville has projected in Pierre through his ambivalence towards Lucy and Isabel. To describe the contrast in Milton Stern's words in The Fine Hammered Steel of Herman Melville:

Different conditions force the mind to judge externalities differently, as Pierre discovers. The externalities them-

selves change as the conditions do. Translated into human history, this reality, this primacy of man's mind is always most meaningful for Melville in social rather than individual terms.46

Isabel and Lucy thus are symbolic of the dualities that exist in Pierre's mind. We find that with his seemingly altruistic thought and action, there is an ulterior motive too. Also just as Yillah and Hautia, the 'fair' and 'dark' women in Mardi represented land and sea respectively, Lucy and Isabel too stand for land and sea respectively. Lucy, who is unshaken in her firm resolve and purity of thought and actions, stands for the land aspect and Isabel, the inscrutable stands for the ocean, that is unfathomable. Of Lucy's association to land, Dr. Amina Amin, in her essay "The Split - Heroine Motif in Melville's Pierre", writes:

...Lucy stands for the vitality of 'unbaked earth' and 'inland grass'. She stands for the 'inland Tahiti', the centre of peace and joy to which Melville would ask man to go from time to time to rejuvenate himself... Lucy stands for this centre of peace and joy and earthly felicity which a man has to combine with his heavenly aspirations, if he has to achieve wholeness.47

Isabel's association to the ocean is suggested by Melville in a veiled way, in the last chapter when Lucy, Pierre and Isabel go to the wharf and watch the ocean. When Isabel

47 Amina Amin, "The Split Heroine Motif in Melville's Pierre" (Ahmedabad: Gujarat University Press, January 1981) Vol. XXIV No.1, p.113
sees the waves, she is reminded of her voyage across the
Atlantic in her childhood. She "convulsively grasped the
arm of Pierre and convulsively spoke"48 the words:

Look, let us go through there;
Bell (Isabel) must go through there;
See! See! Out there upon the
blue! wondrous, wondrous! ... where
the two blues meet, and are nothing -
Bell must go! 49

In the final scene in the prison cell, Pierre calls
Lucy the "Good Angel" and Isabel the "Bad Angel" and says
that now he is "neuter". Pierre says to Lucy and Isabel:

Ye two pale ghosts, were this the
other world, ye were not welcome.
away! ...Good Angel and Bad Angel
both! - for Pierre is neuter now. 50

Pierre has reached that point of time in his life, when
the truth of his own dual nature and the conflict raging
within him dawns on him. His introspection leads him to the
reality of what he is, and what his actions amount to. This
is Melville's ultimate analysis, that man has to search for
the truth of his being and find that he will have to rise above
the dual nature, shaking off both good and evil, in order to
realize the absolute truth of the universal spirit. Pierre
realizes that unless he broke his reticence and admitted the
truth of his own inner duality, he could not attain peace. He
does this by admitting his real relationship as Isabel's
brother thereby admitting before Lucy his incestuous

48 Herman Melville, Pierre Or. The Ambiguities (New York:
49 Ibid., p.397.
50 Ibid., p.403.
relationship and 'dark' nature, Lucy faints and later dies, while Pierre is in a final dilemma between Isabel's projection as wife as well as sister. Of this Melville writes:

He (Pierre) touched her heart. - "Dead Girl! wife or sister, saint or fiend!" - seizing Isabel in his grasp - "in thy breasts, life for infants lodgeth not, but death - milk for thee and me!..." 51

So saying, Pierre takes the poison from within Isabel's dress and consumes it. Isabel too later consumes the poison and dies.

51 Ibid., p. 403.