

Mardi, and a Voyage Thither Narrative Essay

It all started with a man and a idea, as he first stained the paper with jet black ink, printing his name and the title of what was destined to be greatness. Herman Melville's *Mardi, and a Voyage Thither* began with nothing more than blank sheets of paper which laid idle on a desk. Though the moment when a mind of pure genius and a life of experience combine in an attempt to make those blank sheets of paper into something; it is in that instance that you know something extraordinary is about to happen. When reading the book I realized that there were so many things that connected to me on a personal level, relating to my life and personal experience. Later I thought to myself how could anyone see this as anything less than greatness? It turns out that most critics have called this piece of work a failure and comments like that bewilder me. There are scholarly articles about this novel too, some for it but most are against it. That's just how it goes though, not everyone is able to see the greatness is something. It's all just a matter of opinion, because what I believe, to see greatness it depends on who's looking at it.

Philosophical meaning, existentialism, love, adventure, friendship, are all words that can describe the novel *Mardi, and a Voyage Thither*. The novel begins right off with strong writing and word play, words powerful enough to make anyone reread such sentences over and over again. In *Mardi, and a Voyage Thither* Melville says, "To a landsman a calm is no joke. It not only revolutionizes his abdomen, but unsettles his mind; tempts him to recant his belief in the external fitness of things; in short, almost makes an infidel of him." (Melville 4) In my interpretation of this I believe what Melville is saying is that in a certain moment, which he refers to as a calm, when you enter that state you may abandon your beliefs of certain things such as religious beliefs or ethical beliefs due to the realization that things may not be as important as

you have always seen them. I believe this to be true, there have been times when I've seen things I have done to be so important and top priority because through a time period I was in my mind was foreign to things of real importance. Though when the time came when I reached a state of peace and relaxation I contemplated my life, beliefs, and priorities and began seeing that things which were previously sought to be important are, in reality, no more than mere threads on the entire fabric of life and its meaning. When you go through something like that it will just mesmerize when you read a piece of work on such a level of literary excellence, and then uncover the meaning of it and see that you had moments of your life that reflect these mental states being portrayed. Times like that, an experience in the form of which I previously described, will change your life, your viewpoint on life, and induce a spark of extra love for life. I believe that if an author can change your life in a single sentence that the author and the piece of literary work deserve your utmost respect, loyalty, and admiration. Also if they have taught me, and transformed me to acquire those traits which were not previously there then there must be much more I have in common with the author and much more knowledge that can be shared with me. Throughout the story there was so much to be learned as the main characters Taji and Jarl embarked on an adventure from first, escaping from the original ship they were on to finding another ship with stowaways, enduring a storm which they suffered a casualty while undergoing it. From then on it continues as Taji finding and rescuing a girl named Yillah which is soon to be his love and returning to her homeland where Taji is mistaken for a god. This is where he picked up the name Taji as he was unnamed before. He later chooses to stay with her on the island. Later Yillah is kidnapped and the story ends off with Taji setting sail again to find Yillah and return her back to himself. The journey they choose is an unusual one, a long one, and one to me

remembered for the years to come. In all honesty, the story comes second to the words and word play of the story, the deeper side to what's written down, and the contribution it has made to my life. I feel sometimes that a story may just be used to attract your attention so that you will stumble on to the prodigious view to what's actually being said and receive what's meant to be taken from it. It goes without saying that there is power in words, and this novel displays that so much that anyone who reads it will not reach that final page without already becoming a changed person.

When Melville's family was in financial trouble and he couldn't find a job he desired he decided to sign up for his first voyage in 1839. The journeys that took place after that are what created the spark for writing, the ideas and stories which would be implanted in history forever. The piece of work *Mardi* follows the themes of adventure and where it can take you, what life could mean, seeing the world in your own eyes, establishing your beliefs and philosophy, living life the way you want to, and taking your own path to find out who you really are. "He wills to go: to get away from the calm:..." (Melville 5) To get to where you want, you have to find what you believe is best for you; leave the current state you're in to go find the right place, where you need to be. Even if you want to stay you must go, because if you know deep down that where you are is not where you need to be you must do what's best for yourself. There was a chapter in my life where I walked around with this enormous boulder on my back making me sink deeper into the surface each step I took. I knew the only way to relieve this pain was to walk away from the people I hung out with, abandon the wrong they have placed in my head, stop holding back my true potential just to fit in with the majority instead of standing out in the minority. So when you walk this long being encaged, in chains, and enslaved by your own stubbornness, confusion,

delusions and illusions of something you want be real so bad your judgment becomes clouded and after awhile I forgot whats its like to be free. Eventually the day came when I knew I couldn't keep following this self-destructive path and I've ended up at a crossroads. One road led to freedom, hope and change, the other led to a life of darkness, suffering and my own demise. For the first time in my life I did something for me, I broke out the chains, ripped through the cage and headed on the right path, the path I needed to be on, and since then never once have I turned back. "Thoughts of eternity thicken. He begins to feel anxious concerning his soul" (Melville 4). One thing that really motivated me to change is the thought that if I died right now where would my soul reside for eternity? I already knew the answer to that and that one thing right there may have been the single most powerful thing that put me on the right path. That day I promised myself that I would never go back to where I used to be.

Nina Baym wrote an article named *Melville's Quarrel with Fiction* which was revised from its original publication in *PMLA* 34 (1979): 909-23. In the article she talks about Melville, his writing style, why he writes the way he does, and his themes. "Perhaps self-conscious about his occupation for the first time, he perceived authorship as combining the roles of prophet and philosopher, as charged with both discovering and articulating significant truths about man's place in the universe." (Baym) When Melville first began writing he didn't really know what style to pick up, eventually in his third book *Mardi* characters took the role of prophet and philosopher which was not present in his first two books. "This fundamental change resulted, naturally enough, in a very different type of literary work from that which the public expected from Melville, and *Mardi* was a failure." (Baym) The changed in his style resulted in critics saying that *Mardi* was a failure in any and all ways possible. People couldn't see the deeper side

to what he was trying to express in his writing, he was trying to help people establish meaning and understanding in life, to help them see things that you may have been previously blind to. “By the time he wrote his seventh book, *Pierre*, he was convinced that whatever the truth might be, it could not be expressed in works of literature.” (Baym) Time and time again Melville wrote but no one could ever understand the message he was trying to get through. He wanted people to find themselves, find out who they are but because of the high level he was writing on readers could neither see, nor comprehend what his goal was. It’s like he was in a world alone, where everyone thought one way, behaved the same way, and believed the same things and he himself was the only changing variable in a uniformed universe. Living like that, with that feeling is bound to take a toll on you and change how you see things of this world. “Although some critics interpret the "long silence" that followed as the psychological result of failure and fatigue, to others it represents a deliberate act of withdrawal dictated by Melville's sense of the absurdity of the universe, the meaninglessness of language, and, hence, the absurdity of writing.” Melville eventually saw the world, the beliefs in the world, and the traditions as meaningless and foolish and the result of this would later be displayed in his future writing and his themes would follow the same meaning.

Herman Melville was, in most cases, an underrated author stuck in a world where no one understood him or what he was trying to say. The ignorance displayed by the people of his time showed tremendously as they just let the greatness that they had in their time slip away without being acknowledged for what it really was. Though critics can say what they want, people can keep going on with their days without knowledge of Melville and his writing because honestly that doesn’t matter. He changed my life, opened my eyes to truth and meaning of this world, and

if I am the only person in the entire world who was changed by his work I believe that he has still accomplished his goal. If he could change one life, one person, than his work was not in vain, and for that one simple reason of changing a life is the same reason why he is undoubtedly greatness.

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