

Classic Poetry Series

Herman Melville

- poems -

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Herman Melville (1819 - 1891)

Melville was the third of eight children born to Allan and Maria Gansevoort Melville, fairly wealthy middle-class descendants of Scottish and Dutch settlers. He attended Albany Classical School in 1835 and Lansinburgh Academy in 1837 but was mainly self-taught. His early life was spend in almost ceaseless travel. His family moved from New York City to Albany and to Lansinburgh. Following his first naval voyage in 1839 to Liverpool, Melville sailed for years as a whaler and in the US Navy. He visited the islands of the South Sea, Tahiti and Hawaii and was also later to spend time in Europe and Morocco. In 1847 he married Elizabeth Shaw, with whom he had four children including two sons who died prematurely.

Melville was much influenced by Shakespeare and the Bible, as well as by Nathaniel Hawthorne with whom he had a close friendship until 1856 when they drifted apart. Many of his works have disguised autobiographical themes. All his six first novels share the themes of sea travel although the realistic travels described in *Omoo* and *Typee* differ greatly from the allegorical and spiritual journey of, for example, *Moby Dick*. Melville's early work was well-received, but after the publication of *Moby Dick* his popularity diminished. His disappointment was such that after the failure of his darkly comic novel *The Confidence Man*, he moved to New York City in 1863 and worked for many years in a customs house in the city's harbour. Melville is now considered not only a great writer with many original talents, but also a shrewd social critic and philosopher.

America

I

Where the wings of a sunny Dome expand
I saw a Banner in gladsome air-
Starry, like Berenice's Hair-
Afloat in broadened bravery there;
With undulating long-drawn flow,
As rolled Brazilian billows go
Voluminously o'er the Line.
The Land reposed in peace below;
The children in their glee
Were folded to the exulting heart
Of young Maternity.

II

Later, and it streamed in fight
When tempest mingled with the fray,
And over the spear-point of the shaft
I saw the ambiguous lightning play.
Valor with Valor strove, and died:
Fierce was Despair, and cruel was Pride;
And the lorn Mother speechless stood,
Pale at the fury of her brood.

III

Yet later, and the silk did wind
Her fair cold for;
Little availed the shining shroud,
Though ruddy in hue, to cheer or warm
A watcher looked upon her low, and said-
She sleeps, but sleeps, she is not dead.
But in that sleep contortion showed
The terror of the vision there-
A silent vision unavowed,
Revealing earth's foundation bare,
And Gorgon in her hidden place.
It was a thing of fear to see
So foul a dream upon so fair a face,
And the dreamer lying in that starry shroud.

IV

But from the trance she sudden broke-
The trance, or death into promoted life;
At her feet a shivered yoke,
And in her aspect turned to heaven
No trace of passion or of strife-
A clear calm look. It spake of pain,
But such as purifies from stain-

Sharp pangs that never come again-
And triumph repressed by knowledge meet,
Power delicate, and hope grown wise,
And youth matured for age's seat-
Law on her brow and empire in her eyes.
So she, with graver air and lifted flag;
While the shadow, chased by light,
Fled along the far-brawn height,
And left her on the crag.

Herman Melville

Art

In placid hours well-pleased we dream
Of many a brave unbodied scheme.
But form to lend, pulsed life create,
What unlike things must meet and mate:
A flame to melt--a wind to freeze;
Sad patience--joyous energies;
Humility--yet pride and scorn;
Instinct and study; love and hate;
Audacity--reverence. These must mate,
And fuse with Jacob's mystic heart,
To wrestle with the angel--Art.

Herman Melville

Gettysburg

O Pride of the days in prime of the months
Now trebled in great renown,
When before the ark of our holy cause
 Fell Dagon down-
Dagon foredoomed, who, armed and targed,
Never his impious heart enlarged
Beyond that hour; God walled his power,
And there the last invader charged.

He charged, and in that charge condensed
His all of hate and all of fire;
He sought to blast us in his scorn,
 And wither us in his ire.
Before him went the shriek of shells-
Aerial screamings, taunts and yells;
Then the three waves in flashed advance
Surged, but were met, and back they set:
Pride was repelled by sterner pride,
And Right is a strong-hold yet.

Before our lines it seemed a beach
Which wild September gales have strown
With havoc on wreck, and dashed therewith
 Pale crews unknown-
Men, arms, and steeds. The evening sun
Died on the face of each lifeless one,
And died along the winding marge of fight
 And searching-parties lone.

Sloped on the hill the mounds were green,
Our centre held that place of graves,
And some still hold it in their swoon,
And over these a glory waves.
The warrior-monument, crashed in fight,
Shall soar transfigured in loftier light,
 A meaning ampler bear;
Soldier and priest with hymn and prayer
Have laid the stone, and every bone
 Shall rest in honor there.

Herman Melville

Gold in the Mountain

Gold in the mountain,
And gold in the glen,
And greed in the heart,
Heaven having no part,
And unsatisfied men.

Herman Melville

Healed of My Hurt

Healed of my hurt, I laud the inhuman Sea--
Yea, bless the Angels Four that there convene;
For healed I am even by the pitiless breath
Distilled in wholesome dew named rosmarine.

Herman Melville

Immolated

Children of my happier prime,
When One yet lived with me, and threw
Her rainbow over life and time,
Even Hope, my bride, and mother to you!
O, nurtured in sweet pastoral air,
And fed on flowers and light and dew
Of morning meadows -spare, ah, spare
Reproach; spare, and upbraid me not
That, yielding scarce to reckless mood,
But jealous of your future lot,
I sealed you in a fate subdued.
Have I not saved you from the dread
Theft, and ignoring which need be
The triumph of the insincere
Unanimous Mediocrity?
Rest, therefore, free from all despite,
Snugged in the arms of comfortable night.

Herman Melville

Misgivings

When ocean-clouds over inland hills
Sweep storming in late autumn brown,
And horror the sodden valley fills,
And the spire falls crashing in the town,
I muse upon my country's ills--
The tempest burning from the waste of Time
On the world's fairest hope linked with man's foulest crime.

Nature's dark side is heeded now--
(Ah! optimist-cheer dishartened flown)--
A child may read the moody brow
Of yon black mountain lone.
With shouts the torrents down the gorges go,
And storms are formed behind the storms we feel:
The hemlock shakes in the rafter, the oak in the driving keel.

Herman Melville

Shiloh - A Requiem

Skimming lightly, wheeling still,
The swallows fly low
Over the field in clouded days,
The forest-field of Shiloh --
Over the field where April rain
Solaced the parched one stretched in pain
Through the pause of night
That followed the Sunday fight
Around the church of Shiloh--
The church so lone, the log-built one,
That echoed to many a parting groan
And natural prayer
Of dying foemen mingled there --
Foemen at morn, but friends at eve --
Fame or country least their care:
(What like a bullet can undeceive!)
But now they lie low,
While over them the swallows skim,
And all is hushed at Shiloh.

Herman Melville

Shiloh: A Requiem

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Herman Melville

The Berg (a dream)

I saw a ship of material build
(Her standards set, her brave apparel on)
Directed as by madness mere
Against a solid iceberg steer,
Nor budge it, though the infactuate ship went down.
The impact made huge ice-cubes fall
Sullen in tons that crashed the deck;
But that one avalanche was all--
No other movement save the foundering wreck.

Along the spurs of ridges pale,
Not any slenderest shaft and frail,
A prism over glass-green gorges lone,
Toppled; or lace or traceries fine,
Nor pendant drops in grot or mine
Were jarred, when the stunned ship went down.
Nor sole the gulls in cloud that wheeled
Circling one snow-flanked peak afar,
But nearer fowl the floes that skimmed
And crystal beaches, felt no jar.
No thrill transmitted stirred the lock
Of jack-straw needle-ice at base;
Towers indetermined by waves--the block
Atilt impending-- kept their place.
Seals, dozing sleek on sliddery ledges
Slipt never, when by loftier edges
Through the inertia ovrthrown,
The impetuous ship in bafflement went down.

Hard Berg (methought), so cold, so vast,
With mortal damps self-overcast;
Exhaling still thy dankish breath--
Adrift dissolving, bound for death;
Though lumpish thou, a lumbering one--
A lumbering lubbard loitering slow,
Impingers rue thee ad go slow
Sounding thy precipice below,
Nor stir the slimy slug that sprawls
Along thy dead indifference of walls.

Herman Melville

The Enthusiast

"Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him"

Shall hearts that beat no base retreat
In youth's magnanimous years -
Ignoble hold it, if discreet
When interest tames to fears;
Shall spirits that worship light
Perfidious deem its sacred glow,
Recant, and trudge where worldlings go,
Conform and own them right?

Shall Time with creeping influence cold
Unnerve and cow? The heart
Pine for the heartless ones enrolled
With palterers of the mart?
Shall faith abjure her skies,
Or pale probation blench her down
To shrink from Truth so still, so lone
Mid loud gregarious lies?

Each burning boat in Caesar's rear,
Flames -No return through me!
So put the torch to ties though dear,
If ties but tempters be.
Nor cringe if come the night:
Walk through the cloud to meet the pall,
Though light forsake thee, never fall
From fealty to light.

Herman Melville

The Maldive Shark

About the Shark, phlegmatical one,
Pale sot of the Maldive sea,
The sleek little pilot-fish, azure and slim,
How alert in attendance be.
From his saw-pit of mouth, from his charnel of maw,
They have nothing of harm to dread,
But liquidly glide on his ghastly flank
Or before his Gorgonian head;
Or lurk in the port of serrated teeth
In white triple tiers of glittering gates,
And there find a haven when peril's abroad,
An asylum in jaws of the Fates!
They are friends; and friendly they guide him to prey,
Yet never partake of the treat --
Eyes and brains to the dotard lethargic and dull,
Pale ravener of horrible meat.

Herman Melville

The Mound by the Lake

The grass shall never forget this grave.
When homeward footing it in the sun
After the weary ride by rail,
The stripling soldiers passed her door,
Wounded perchance, or wan and pale,
She left her household work undone -
Duly the wayside table spread,
With evergreens shaded, to regale
Each travel-spent and grateful one.
So warm her heart, childless, unwed,
Who like a mother comforted.

Herman Melville

The Portent

Hanging from the beam,
Slowly swaying (such the law),
Gaunt the shadow on the green,
Shenandoah!
The cut is on the crown
(Lo, John Brown),
And the stabs shall heal no more.

Hidden in the cap
Is the anguish none can draw;
So your future veils its face,
Shenandoah!
But the streaming beard is shown
(Weird John Brown),
The meteor of the war.

Herman Melville