Light and Dark in Melville

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English 313

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Herman Melville frequently writes about the dark and light side of human nature and the environment. Melville’s premise is that all things have a dark and light side and that each side in incomplete without the other. As depicted in the story, “The Encantadas or Enchanted Isles”,[[1]](#footnote-1) the characteristics in human nature that tend to protect or defend would be the dark side. The characteristics that aspire to higher virtues such as hope, are the light side.

Melville uses a tortoise as a metaphor for human life and the world: “Yea they seemed the identical tortoises where the Hindoo plants this total sphere” (p.104). The narrator’s description of the tortoise states:

 . . . even the tortoise, dark and melancholoy as it is upon the back, still possesses a bright side . . . if you put them on their backs you thereby expose their light sides without the possibility of their recovering themselves . . . The tortoise is both black and bright (p. 104).

The shell, or dark side, provides protection for the turtle’s light, underside. Without the protection of the hard shell, the turtle would die. Its underside would become “Tortoise steaks and tortoise stews” (p.106). Likewise, the shell would be empty and be used for “Fanciful soup-toureens” (p. 106). These things may be useful but the original tortoise is no more. It is destroyed.

When the tortoise is on his back and its light side is exposed to the world, the tortoise becomes vulnerable. It is unable to defend itself. When man exposes his light side or spiritual side to the world without discretion, he also becomes vulnerable.

When walking on Barrington Isle, the narrator comments on seats that old Buccaneers had fashioned for themselves. They were,

Fine old ruins of what had once been symmetric lounges of stone and turf . . . just such a sofa as the poet Gray might have loved . . . (p. 120).

These seats were fit for poets yet the Buccaneers “were mere cut throats” (p. 120). These pirates have a light side to go along with their physical brutality and tyranny. In order for them to survive they had to be brutal. They were not totally dark and evil but “ . . . persecution, or adversity . . . had driven (them) from Christian society” (p. 120). The narrator marvels and asks:

Could it be possible, that they robbed and murdered one day, reveled the next, and rested themselves by turning meditative philosophers, rural poets, and seat builders the third? . . . among these adventurers were some gentlemanly, companionable souls, capable of genuine tranquility and virtue (p. 121).

These Buccaneers, like the tortoise, cannot be totally light or totally dark.

On Charles’ Isle, the Dog King makes himself “Supreme Lord of the Island” (p. 122). He represents law and order. To manintain law and order on the isle full of people from ships deserted, the Dog King uses his ferocious dogs to enforce the law. Eventually, the King is overthrown by his subjects. The people of the island then become ruled by a “Riotocracy, which gloried in having no law but lawlessness” (p. 125).

The Dog King represents the dark side as law and order. He was there to protect the people of the island. The law and order is comparable to the tortoise’s dark side or its shell. The freedom of the people from the King represents the light side or the spirit of the people. The people, not realizing it, threw off their dark shell and their protection. Without the King, the island became, “. . . the unassailed lurking-place of all sorts of desperadoes who in the name of liberty did just what they pleased” (p. 125).

The Dog King also has a personal light side as well. The narrator comments that given the people he had to deal with, the King’s measure of law is pardonable. He imagines that the King was “in some degree influenced by not unworthy motives” (p. 141). He had to show his dark side to fulfill the lighter side of his ideals.

In the “Eighth Sketch,” a widowed Indian, Hunilla, must show her dark side or hard shell so that she can survive. She must physically bury her husband with her hands. Only the inner light gave her the strength she needed to do the job. The “strong persuasions of her Romish faith” (p. 131) is the inner light she had. When she is finally rescued, she must leave all but two dogs behind because there are not enough supplies on the ship to keep them. These were the dogs that kept her company many days while she waited for rescue. The dogs left behind begin to howl and run as they realize the Hunilla is leaving them. She keeps her back to the dogs and “never looked behind her . . . “ (p. 137). She had “A heart of yearning in a frame of steel” (p. 138). Here heart or spirit would not have been able to survive without the exterior physical act of being hard and cold.

Hunilla’s light side is also expressed by the indiscriminate trusting hope she had that someone would rescue her. It is human nature to sometimes “repulse a sane despair with a hope which is but mad” (p. 132). This hope is a light side, which allows us to survive despite the ugliness and darkness of this world. Without the hope that she would be rescued, Hunilla would not have bothered to try to survive. She would have died. She needed both the light and the dark side to survive.

Hope and trust is needed for survival but if it is not accompanied by the dark side, which is protection, we would become victims. The fish in the “Third Sketch” exemplify what happens with blinding trust without the dark side. The small fish that swim near the top of the water are only too happy to swim to the bait as soon as it is thrown in. The fish “inconsiderately trust, while they do not understand human nature” (p. 110). The fish are metaphors for the people of the world. If people only show their light side of trust without the dark side of caution, and even some distrust towards other humans, they will soon be victimized.

The sailors that come to the Hermit Oberlus’s isle are like the fish. The Hermit invites them to friendship and uses liquor as bait. The sailors “need little pressing” (p. 143) to sit down with the hermit. As soon as they are drunk enough, they are tied and bound and put to work as slaves. They never thought for a moment that the hermit and ulterior motives. Their lack of a dark, protective shell caused them to be victimized.

The Hermit Oberlus did not want to expose his nature to strangers and went to great lengths to keep his back turned to them, “ . . . since it revealed the least” (p. 139). The vital part of him—the face, internal and external organs—is the vulnerable part. The vital part of Oberlus is a metaphor for the vital part of humanity, which is its spirit.

As despicable as Oberlus is, it should not be assumed that because he does not show his light side, “. . . for that cause declare the creature to be one total inky blot” (p.104). Oberlus does not show one positive side to his nature during the telling of the “Ninth Sketch.” Only at the very end do we find that he is an “accomplished writer, and no mere boor; and what is more, was capable of the most trustful eloquence” (p. 145). This is the hermit’s light side that was never shown.

Even the islands of the Encantadas have a light and dark side. Its dark side is the climate of the islands. It is on the Equator line with little or no rain. The islands contain no advanced flora or fauna. They are bleak and hostile. Although the islands are hostile to human life, they do provide a refuge. Ships looking for a minimal amount of food and water would be able to find it on the islands. Sailors who deserted their ships would also find refuge, for a time, on the islands.

Melville shows that there can be no light without the dark. They are part of the whole. Melville makes it clear that to survive in this world, all things need to have a hard, protective shell against the harshness of the world and also an inner light or softer side to deal with the world’s harsh reality.

1. *The Encantadas and Other Stories,* by Herman Melville [↑](#footnote-ref-1)