

## Melville's

### William Potter

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Readers whose only exposure to Herman Melville was an assigned reading of *Moby Dick* in college may be surprised to learn that Melville also wrote poetry. Almost certainly, some of those same readers wish that their professor had assigned the poetry rather than Ahab's epic quest for the white whale. They would almost certainly lament that wish if they had been assigned *Clarel*, the subject of this study.

Melville's 1876 poem is more than 18,000 lines long and is generally considered "nearly incoherent and virtually worthless." The author seeks to counter that impression by arguing: "*Clarel* is, by far, Melville's most embittered and sustained critique of America, a critique that is, at its core, religious in nature."

Potter, who holds a doctorate in English and now teaches English at Santa Fe Community College, organizes his study into three sections. In the first, he provides an overview of nineteenth-century fascination with comparative religion. Potter identifies two predominant lines of thought amongst Western writers and thinkers on comparative religion: one line argued that Christianity is the evolutionary result of religious faith over time, and was therefore more advanced than other religions. The other, less popular, line of thought seeks not to rank the world's faiths, but rather to explore the underlying similarities of all faiths. It is with this line of thought, Potter argues, that Melville's sympathies lay.

The second section of Potter's study identifies the ways Melville attempts to locate what he calls in *Clarel* "the intersympathy of creeds," that commonality of the world's major religions. By rejecting the notion that Christianity was the culmination of a natural progression, Melville not only went against the dominant opinion but also, Potter argues, implicitly critiqued the notion that democracy as represented by the United States was the culmination of an evolution of political thought.

In the final section, Potter examines Melville's representation of various faiths in the poem. Ultimately, Potter argues that whereas Melville's fiction, including *Moby Dick*, "is an unending [and unsuccessful] search for soul (self) and God (meaning)," in *Clarel* the title character is much more successful as a result of his encounters with other religions, beliefs, and faiths. Although like Ishmael, Clarel is alone at the end of the work, Clarel recognizes that he is a "part of the great cosmic train."

Although Potter does not succeed in making *Clarel* seem a better poem, he certainly succeeds in making his readers consider that it might have more to offer the serious Melville scholar than previously thought. In fact, if a student should find himself or herself enrolled in a class where the professor has assigned *Clarel*, this book will help.

ERIK BLEDSOE (November / December 2004)

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