



200TH ANNIVERSARY OF HERMAN MELVILLE: INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR  
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## **200th Anniversary of Herman Melville: Interview with Professor Rodrigo Andrés González**

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<sup>1</sup> Andrés Ibarra Cordero is currently a PhD candidate at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA), University of Amsterdam. He holds a Master in Comparative Literature from King's College London and an English BA from Pontificia Universidad Católica.



This interview is the result of a research stay at the University of Barcelona where I had the privilege of meeting Professor Rodrigo Andrés. This research stay, during 2019, also coincided with the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Herman Melville of whom Professor Andrés is a seminal expert. As such, we had an interesting conversation about Melville's body of fiction and its importance to gender studies. Professor Andrés is Senior Lecturer in 19<sup>th</sup> Century American Literature, a research member of ADHUC (Research Center for Theory, Gender, Sexuality), and currently Vice-President of the Spanish Association for American Studies (SAAS). He is the author of *Herman Melville: poder y amor entre bombres* (2007), editor of *The Figure of 'The Neighbor' in 19th Century Literature* (2014), *Homoerotismos literarios* (2011), and co-editor of *Hombres soñados por escritoras de boy* (2009). Besides his extensive research on Melville, Professor Andrés has also written on Walt Whitman, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Tillie Olsen, Grace Paley, Fae Myenne Ng, Rosalía de Castro, and Augusto Roa Bastos, among other authors.

**The fiction of Herman Melville seems to be very central to the nineteenth century American literary canon. In what way does reading Melville remain relevant today?**

Melville's work was ahead of the nineteenth century and is ahead of us today. In the nineteenth century, most great American writers—Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Dickinson—were thinking of the problems of interpretation. Their questions focused on issues such as the meaning of nature or the meaning of one's self. Melville, however, went much deeper in that conundrum by focusing not only on the object of our interpretation but on ourselves as partial/biased/prejudiced/limited interpreters. I am always moved by how at the beginning of *Moby-Dick* we see the citizens of New York and other parts of the globe looking towards the water in deep

meditation. However, Melville's focus is not on the water, which everybody is gazing at, but on the heterogeneous human beings who contemplate it from their different perspectives.

To me, Melville reminds us today that we live in a plural world, and that any community needs to be aware of, and attentive to, its internal differences if it wants to be an actual community and not the masses. Living, for Melville, is living *with*, and living in a constant encounter with someone who is always "the Other". Only if we stop looking at that other only as our Other and realize that we are his/her Other too, will we begin to establish the ground for relationships based on reciprocity and the possibilities of being creative in what, in a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, Melville called "ineffable socialities". For me, reading Melville is a cure against egocentrism and cultural chauvinism, and we need that cure now maybe even more than they may have needed it in the mid nineteenth century.

**In very general terms, current literary scholarship tends to avoid the scrutiny of the author's biography for textual analysis. Do you regard Melville's biography as revealing to understand the psychological depth of his fiction?**

I understand the point of reading a text without studying its author's biography. It is decades since Roland Barthes declared de "death of the author" to enable the birth of the reader. However, I personally need to understand the conditions behind the writing of a book, and one of those "conditions" is the book's author, with his/her historical conditions and personal biography.

In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael states that if anybody finds a manuscript written by him when he dies, all the praise should go to the whaling ships, for a whaling ship was his Harvard and his Yale. In a way, the same thing applies to the very Herman Melville. In his three years travelling the world initially as part of a whaling expedition, Melville saw *difference* (in other continents, in other hemispheres, in other ethnic groups, in other cultures, religions, and languages) in a way that schooled not only his literary imagination but his moral imagination as well. Melville's constant exercises of empathy in his writings are the result of his ethical "travelling" to be in the other person's shoes, and that genuine interest in travelling *to* the other had, I believe, its roots in Melville's biography which, I think, must be taken into account to understand Melville's literary production.

**Readers of *Moby-Dick*, possibly his most famous novel, would tend to associate Melville's fiction to a very "masculine" or "men-only" world. Is it possible to read Melville through a feminist lens? How has feminism contributed to scholarship on Melville?**

There have been a considerable number of important works by feminist critics of Melville's oeuvre over the last decades, among whom I would probably highlight Wyn Kelley, professor of literature at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I have to say that, although it is true that Melville's oeuvre is predominantly about men (he dealt, mostly, with life on board whale ships, slave ships, frigates, man-of-war ships) he was also attentive to the reality of women both as a community and as individuals.

In his diptych "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids", for instance, Melville denounces the terrible working and living conditions of women in the paper mills of the mid nineteenth century. And in one of the sketches of his "The Encantadas" (The Galápagos islands), he gives us the character of Hunilla, a Peruvian woman of astonishing fortitude and endurance. And also, even if it is true that there are not many female characters in Melville's fiction, his literary production is a real feast for any feminist critic just because of his unflagging criticism of the logic of what we today call patriarchy.

**Your book *Herman Melville: poder y amor entre hombres* validates Melville's democratic commitment towards equality and emphasizes the subversive potential of "love between men" within a larger patriarchal context (your use of "power" in its title clearly suggest that). How was Melville "dissident" within nineteenth century American culture? Was his perspective also shared by some of his contemporaries?**

I strongly believe that both Herman Melville and his full contemporary Walt Whitman could foresee, in the 1850s, with laser vision, the two major changes in the prevailing understanding of masculinity of the second half of the nineteenth century. In the first place, the Civil War, in which men would be killing men, and in the second place, the progressive imposition of a ferocious, rat-race, capitalism, in which men would be competing against men. In resistance to the way in which masculinity was beginning to be understood (as men *antagonizing* other men), both Melville and

Whitman held on to the alternative of men *loving* men (physically and/or non-physically) as an important condition to create a less hierarchical society. Although they did not use these terms, both Whitman and Melville are advocates of what I call a “socialist utopian universalism” in which men integrate the possibility of loving other men as part of the construction of truly democratic selves.

**You discuss a fascinatingly wide range of critical material and texts, but your main argumentative thread leads, eventually, to *Billy Budd, Sailor*. Why did you decide to expand more on that novel?**

Honestly, it was a gut feeling. There are other texts by Melville that I may like or enjoy even more than I do *Billy Budd, Sailor*, but when I first read this novella, by the moment I had turned the last page I already knew that I would be writing about it. My contribution to the school of criticism of the novel was, therefore, not only an intellectual intervention but an emotional and affective one, as well. I felt that everything I read *on* the novel had to do with the issues of justice, revolution, law, and social hierarchies. What I very strongly felt was missing in the literature was a discussion of *love*, and that is why “amor” is one of the key terms of my title. To me, the whole novella spins around and not enough paid attention to a moment in the novel: when the narrator informs us that “Claggart could even have loved Billy but for fate and ban”.

A few years ago, in an interview, Canadian writer Margaret Atwood stated that “the answers you get from literature depend on the questions you pose”. As my question on *Billy Budd, Sailor* was on the exact nature of the love for other men that the three main characters (Billy, Claggart, and Vere) feel/allow themselves to feel/forbid themselves from feeling, those were the kind of answers I got from the novella.

**In your book, you outline a parallel between the publication of Melville’s *Billy Budd, Sailor* and the historical moment when Michel Foucault identifies the emergence of the “homosexual subjectivity”. How is this useful to read male same-sex desire in Melville’s fiction?**

I think that love between men is recurrent throughout the whole of Melville’s literary production. What is interesting is that in his early novels from the late 1840s (*Typee, Omoo, Redburn*)

and his great classic *Moby-Dick* (1851), Melville focuses on the possibilities of the implementation of that love, for example in the relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg, whose bond we may give many different labels to but which, ultimately, is based on genuine, caring love. *Billy Budd, Sailor*, however, written after the moment that Michel Foucault identifies as the emergence of the “homosexual subjectivity”, focuses not on the love between men but on homophobia.

Once the figure of the “homosexual subject” started to circulate in popular culture the immediate reaction was men’s panic of being “tainted” by that figure. In *Billy Budd, Sailor* Melville, extremely sensitive to the cultural change regarding love between men in the last decades of his life (he died in 1891), lays bare the psychological and social mechanisms that get activated when men (both Vere and Claggart) fall in love with another man (Billy), studies their reactions, and denounces them as irrational and monstrous, as they are based on the violent denial of one’s true feelings and passions.

**You maintain that Melville’s character of Billy Budd represents a subaltern “other” that embodies different forms of oppression. What was Melville’s purpose for this?**

I think that Melville constantly establishes analogies between different kinds of oppression. Although the character of Billy Budd is white, he is constantly compared to a black slave. The intention behind this is not only to tell the readers that in the middle of the ocean common sailors get treated like slaves. With the comparison, Melville is very subtly making his readers open up their eyes to the horrors of slavery in the south of the country. Melville’s readership was mostly made up of white, Christian, racist men, so Melville could not afford to antagonize his only market by confronting them openly with their racism. Instead, as he told his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne in one of his letters, he had to learn to deceive the “superficial skimmer of pages” and write for those “eagle-eyed readers” who would hopefully be affected by his anti-racist message.

**Are you currently doing research on Melville? Can you tell us something about your current project?**

I am currently leading a research project with the title “Troubling Houses: Dwellings, Materiality, and the Self in American Literature” generously funded by the Spanish “Ministerio

de Economía y Competitividad”. My research within this project is to study Melville’s short stories “The Apple-Tree Table”, “I and My Chimney”, and “Jimmy Rose”. In all of them, the narrator of the story establishes a bond with one element of the house (a table, the chimney, the wallpaper, respectively) that awakens his interest for a former inhabitant of the house, a bachelor, an unproductive and unproductive man whose lifestyle represents for the narrator not only something to rescue from the past but maybe also a new mode of living in the present. The critical tools of the study of queer temporalities offer me the opportunity to read the houses in these stories as fascinating spaces of possibilities to be creative with one’s life, one’s friendships, and one’s loves.