

'To injure no man,  
but to bless all mankind'

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## A melodrama that strips away illusions

*New play 'Pierre' shows  
Melville relevant as ever.*

By M.S. Mason  
Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

**H**erman Melville could never really make a living as a writer. Hard as it may be to believe now, the critics of his era savaged "Moby Dick," among his other works, and the poor man wound up working six days a week behind a desk trying to support his family on the wages of a custom-house clerk.

But his immense talent and his profound insights into the workings of the human mind lived on despite the critics. Those insights are as relevant as ever. That's why "Pierre," currently receiving its world premiere at the Denver Center Theatre Company, is such good news.

Renowned playwright Jeffrey Hatcher (whose adaptation of the book "Tuesdays with Morrie" opens in New York next fall) based his fascinating, broadly theatrical play on "Pierre, or, the Ambiguities," Melville's least-acclaimed work.

Hatcher has distilled its essence, reveling in its highly refined theatrical language and its melodramatic plot.

It's a tale about a rich young man, Pierre, who is disillusioned about his idolized late father when he discovers that he has an illegitimate half sister, Isabel, living in dire straits.

The honorable young man rescues her and her mad friend, sending his mother, Mary, into a tizzy of revenge. She disinherits her son on the spot, leaving the estate to Pierre's obnoxious cousin, who covets Pierre's spurned fiancée.

Pierre has fallen in love with sister Isabel — learning later that she is not his sister after all. That distinction belongs to Isabel's mad friend.

When Pierre calls out his wicked cousin in a duel, the spurned fiancée appears with her brother and the stage is littered with bodies.

In his book, Melville lambasted romanticism. All of Pierre's idealistic illusions are torn away by malice, by the treachery of those closest to him, by the vicissitudes of the world. But he is not guiltless. He is rash, his idealism is not grounded in reality.

He turns with unforgiving fury on anyone who doesn't live up to his expectations, and he fails to see his own flaws.

"Part of the problem with Pierre as a character is he sees himself as a reflection of archetypes," Mr. Hatcher says. "He looks at himself and says, I must behave as a Christian martyr would, or, I must behave as Hamlet would. Because he's modeling himself in large part on figures from fiction and the Bible, he's not able to fulfill his role — like an actor who is trying on a role that is too big..."

Pierre hasn't achieved in his life the wisdom or the moral stature of



TERRY SHAPIRO/DENVER CENTER THEATRE COMPANY

**'PIERRE':** The play, starring Morgan Hallett as Isabel (right), just premiered in Denver.

the figures he wishes to emulate — so everything he does is a pose.

Every character in "Pierre" makes mistakes — they all overreact. They go for the most forceful gesture.

"People like to feel they are doing something bold because it makes them feel stronger in the world," Hatcher says. "But if you move too quickly and with too much

vigor, you break things — like the proverbial bull in the China shop.

"Some people suggest that 'Pierre' and 'Moby Dick' be read in tandem because both main characters, Ahab and Pierre, are searching after an unattainable goal... Both are frustrated... but not simply because of the outside world. The characters themselves are flawed."