"No One Is His Own Sire": Dead Letters and Kinship in Melville's *Pierre*

**Introduction**

In a letter to Evert A. Duyckinck written in 1849, Herman Melville expounds his famous view on genealogy: “The truth is that we are all sons, grandsons, or nephews or great-nephews of those who go before us. No one is his own sire” (*Correspondence* 121). Three years later Melville published *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (1852), a work featuring family as its central theme. Familial relationships between its protagonist Pierre and other characters, notably his dead father and his putative sister Isabel, provide a crucial pivot upon which this novel unfolds. Further, there is no doubt that the act of writing is an equally crucial theme. We learn that Pierre used to be an author of sentimental poems (*Pierre* 245). More importantly, the latter part of this novel is devoted exclusively to the process of his writing a novel.

The word “author” has a meaning of “father”: “One who begets; a father, an ancestor” (*OED*). Being the author of a book is like being a father of a child. Indeed, there are a number of passages in *Pierre* in which the author-book relationship is metaphorically likened to a father-child relationship. Wai-Chee Dimock aptly notes that in *Pierre*, “[t]o be original is to be ‘without father or mother,’ to be outside the province of kinship” (Dimock 141). Just before Pierre leaves Saddle Meadows for New York, he declares: “Henceforth, cast-out Pierre hath no paternity, and no past; and since the Future is one blank to all; therefore, twice-disinherited Pierre stands untrammeledly his ever-present self!” (199). The fact that Pierre’s becoming an orphan by the abandonment of his house coincides with his becoming an author of a novel is significant, for Melville repeatedly problematizes the possibility of an original
self freed of kinship ties, always associating it with that of being an original author. The fundamental question posed by this novel is whether Pierre, by means of his authorship, can attain his “ever-present self” with “no paternity” and “no past.”

Recent criticisms have attempted to examine the close interrelationship between the two themes, writing and kinship. In exploring such a relationship further, it seems important to note the fact that letters appear repeatedly in Pierre. In total, more than twenty letters appear in this novel, and if we extend the definition of “letter” further to include the portrait of Pierre’s father, Plotinus Plinlimmon’s pamphlet, Pierre’s novel, and all other paper materials that are sent and received, the number would increase dramatically. Sufficient attention has not been paid to this fictional device, despite its conspicuous presence within the novel. The ultimate aim of this paper is to reveal how the presence of letters in Pierre relates to this novel’s main themes.

In discussing the letters in Pierre, this paper will regard them essentially as “dead letters.” “Dead letter” is of course a term used in Melville’s short story “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853), the first story Melville published after Pierre. In this story, Bartleby is described as once having worked at the Dead Letter Office. Given the fact that in both Pierre and “Bartleby” letters are a conspicuous presence, and that both were written within the span of two years, it would not be far-fetched to presuppose a continuity between the two, and to see the presence of dead letters as already ingrained in Pierre. Although the phrase “dead letter” is found only in “Bartleby,” it nevertheless provides a crucial key to understanding Pierre.

1. Letter’s Secret Surface

Many letters appear in Pierre. Of particular relevance to our argument are: Isabel’s letter apprising him of the presence of his sister and of his father’s secret past; Lucy’s letter announcing that she is coming to Pierre’s apartment in New York; and the vengeful letter that Pierre receives from Glen and Fredrick, which eventually prompts him to murder Glen. Letters indeed “shape the narrative arc of the entire novel” (Hewitt 84).

The abundance of letters as such might lead us to expect that there is as much communication between the characters, but rather what emerges is its absence. The traffic of letters in Pierre does not equate with the word “corre-
response," a word meaning an exchange of letters. True, letters are sent and received between the characters, but it cannot be said that they constitute an exchange of communication; strangely, they function as a means of one-way communication which conveys a writer's intent, but defies the addressee to respond. What distinguishes the use of letters in *Pierre* is that the letters are never exchanged.

For instance, Isabel's letter demands only that Pierre come to her house without asking for a response; Lucy's letter violently announcing to Pierre that she is going to live with him does not demand his approval. Interestingly, Pierre writes in a letter addressed to Lucy: "Don't write me; don't inquire for me" (94). This injunction seems to define the nature of the letter-writing in this novel; a letter always commands an addressee to accept its message and to forgo any questions about it. These letters announce what the characters want without asking for any approval from the addressee. Gurkin Janet Altman, in her discussion of the function of letters in novels at large, argues that "the reader [of a letter] is 'called upon' to respond" and that "this is the epistolary pact—the call for response from a specific reader within the correspondent's world" (Altman 89). However, *Pierre* presents a peculiar epistolary situation in which a writer, despite his or her desire to communicate something to an addressee, inhibits any response. Later in our discussion, we shall see how this lack of correspondence between the characters relates to Pierre's destiny in a significant way.

Another noteworthy characteristic that marks the letters in *Pierre* is that they are often presented as something which cannot be destroyed. Even if they are materially destroyed, they hauntingly reappear before Pierre. As to the impossibility of destroying letters, there is a highly suggestive passage. After reading Lucy's letter which announces her imminent arrival at Pierre's apartment in New York, he is asked by Isabel to show it to her. Instead, he refuses and burns it, fearful that the secret of his having had a fiancée might be revealed to her. After seeing Pierre burn the letter, Isabel mysteriously says: "It is burnt, but not consumed; it is gone, but not lost. Through stove, pipe, and flue, it hath mounted in flame, and gone as a scroll to heaven! It shall appear again, my brother" (315). Isabel's remark "[i]t shall appear again" sounds quite puzzling, because the letter is already burnt and lost, and there is nothing left to which "it" can refer.
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Isabel’s prophetic words naturally raise a series of questions such as why letters cannot be “consumed” and “lost,” and why they “shall appear again.” In order to delve into these questions, we must focus on the representation of faces in Pierre. Just as letters are a prominent presence in this novel, faces comprise an equally recurrent motif. Isabel’s face and Plinlimmon’s face haunt Pierre in such a way that he seems frightened less by these characters, than by the faces themselves. In Pierre’s mind, Isabel’s face is not “her face” but “the face”: “The face!—the face! . . . the face steals down upon me” (41). Moreover, Plinlimmon’s face is “something separate, and apart; a face by itself” (293). By the absence of personal pronouns, these descriptions stress the faces’ materiality as things. These faces in Pierre of course have earned attention from critics, most notably from Elizabeth Renker. Making a contrast between Moby-Dick and Pierre, she discusses the lack of “depth” in Pierre: “[I]t is the invisibility of Moby-Dick’s face that is most importantly lost in Pierre; that invisibility is what sustains the metaphysical quest that subsequently goes bankrupt in Pierre, as faces/pages emerge from invisible ‘depth’ to haunt the hero in the visual field” (Renker 26). Renker’s important emphasis is placed on seeing a “face” in Pierre not merely as “human face,” but as “page” or paper’s material surface.

The dichotomy between “inside/invisible” and “outside/visible” which Renker introduces here matters greatly in Pierre. Pierre tries to keep secrets from everyone; he pretends to be Isabel’s husband before Lucy, and he also pretends to be Lucy’s cousin before Isabel. Pierre always tries to keep the truths invisible by concealing them inside his heart. As a corollary to such secrecy, he is always assailed by the fear that his secrets might come out at any moment.

In discussing the letters in the context of Renker’s argument, Isabel’s letter, which announces her sisterhood to Pierre, is crucial. Notably, it reaches Pierre quite mysteriously. This letter is handed to him by a “hooded and obscure-looking figure” who finds Pierre just when he is about to enter Lucy’s cottage. This scene, while noted by few critics, is worth close attention:

He had nearly gained the cottage door, when the lantern crossed over toward him; and as his nimble hand was laid at last upon the little wicket-gate, which he thought was now to admit him to so much delight;
a heavy hand was laid upon himself, and at the same moment, the lantern was lifted toward his face, by a hooded and obscure-looking figure, whose half-averted countenance he could but indistinctly discern. But Pierre's own open aspect, seemed to have been quickly scrutinized by the other.

"I have a letter for Pierre Glendinning," said the stranger, "and I believe this is he." (61)

This passage is puzzling especially in three respects. First, the letter comes to Pierre not through the post office, but through an unknown messenger. Second, there is no telling why the messenger has to hide his face from Pierre; his face is "hooded" and "half-averted." Finally, it is inexplicable why the messenger, a complete stranger to Pierre, can identify Pierre's face in such a dim light. A point also not to be missed here is that the "face" is given exceptional focus again. Given these peculiarities, we are forced to question who this mysterious messenger might be, a mystic figure who hides his face from Pierre but knows Pierre's face.

Pierre's reaction to the letter is also bizarre, especially since he seems to know the content of this letter even before he reads it. He is excessively meticulous in securing privacy to read it as if he knew that it contained some secret that must not be revealed. After receiving the letter, Pierre returns to his house and he "entered the hall unnoticed, passed up to his chamber, and hurriedly locking the door in the dark, lit his lamp." And "[t]hen, as he avertedly drew the letter from his bosom, he whispered to himself—Out on thee, Pierre! how sheepish now will ye feel when this tremendous note will turn out to be an invitation to a supper to-morrow night" (62). Quite peculiarly, Pierre describes this unread letter as "tremendous," as if he knew its content. Also to be noted in this passage is the word "averted," a key term which is repeatedly used from the very time he received Isabel's letter: the messenger's face is "half-averted" (61), Pierre "avertedly" takes out the letter, and he "held the letter averted" (62). What the repeated use of this single word emphasizes is that the face, both the human face and the letter's surface, is represented as that which has to be withheld from Pierre's view.

Also, it is interesting to note that at first Pierre doubts whether the letter, though bearing the signature of the name "Isabel," was actually written by this person. After reading the letter, Pierre says: "This is some accursed dream!—
nay, but this paper thing is forged,—a base and malicious forgery, I swear; —
Well didst thou hide thy face from me, thou vile lanterned messenger” (65).
Here Pierre doubts the signature of the letter, suspecting that it was written by
the messenger, not by Isabel. His doubt about the letter’s authenticity is not a
wholly unwarranted idea, for he has never talked with this person called
“Isabel.” The question of who carries the letter to Pierre seems to be bound up
with the other question of who writes the letter to him.

Plinlimmon’s pamphlet is of great relevance to these two questions. Pierre
comes across this pamphlet in the stagecoach on his way to New York. Yet,
after a short reading, he loses the pamphlet. Later he attempts to find it, but he
cannot, and must give up his hope of reading it again. The narrator tells us that
this pamphlet is found inside Pierre’s clothes after his death: “Pierre must have
ignorantly thrust it into his pocket. . . . So that all the time he was hunting for
this pamphlet, he himself was wearing the pamphlet” (294). Pointing out this
peculiar incident, the narrator stresses that, although Pierre had cursorily read
the pamphlet just once, he did understand what it meant:

Possibly this curious circumstance may in some sort illustrate his self-
supposed non-understanding of the pamphlet, as first read by him in the
stage. Could he likewise have carried about with him in his mind the
thorough understanding of the book, and yet not be aware that he so
understood it? I think that—regarded in one light—the final career of
Pierre will seem to show, that he did understand it. And here it may be
randomly suggested, by way of bagatelle, whether some things that men
think they do not know, are not for all that thoroughly comprehended by
them; and yet, so to speak, though contained in themselves, are kept a
secret from themselves? (294; italics original)

What the narrator implies here is that Plinlimmon’s pamphlet shows Pierre’s
secret, and this secret is inside his heart which he cannot read. What is
important here is the fact that, although it goes “inside” Pierre’s clothes, the
pamphlet ultimately remains “outside” Pierre’s body; the secret to be hidden
inside is exposed externally in the form of writing.

It is possible to consider Plinlimmon’s pamphlet not as a thesis addressed to
a general readership, but as a letter privately addressed to Pierre. Just when he
begins to feel insecure about the Christly integrity of his motive for saving Isabel, a part of the long thesis, the very part which expounds the impossibility of the Christly practice of self-renunciation, suddenly appears to Pierre. Before introducing the transcription of the pamphlet, the narrator insinuates Pierre’s incipient doubt of his ambition:

If a man be in any vague latent doubt about the intrinsic correctness and excellence of his general life-theory and practical course of life; then, if that man chance to light on any other man, or any little treatise, or sermon, which unintendly, as it were, yet very palpably illustrates to him the intrinsic incorrectness and non-excellence of both the theory and the practice of his life; then that man will—more or less unconsciously—try hard to hold himself back from the self-admitted comprehension of a matter which thus condemns him. For in this case, to comprehend, is himself to condemn himself, which is always highly inconvenient and uncomfortable to a man. (209)

If “to comprehend, is himself to condemn himself,” the pamphlet, which threatens to reveal Pierre’s secret to him, is something from which he has to “avert” his eyes.

The question of how this pamphlet reaches Pierre is also worth close attention. He finds it as if by mere chance: “[H]is glance lit upon his own clutched hand, which rested on his knee. Some paper protruded from that clutch. He knew not how it had got there, or whence it had come, though himself had closed his own gripe upon it.” The narrator makes a tentative conjecture about the pamphlet: “It must have been accidentally left there by some previous traveler” (206). We must note that the narrator qualifies his statement with equivocating “must have,” thus leaving room for other possibilities.

In light of our claim that Plinlimmon’s pamphlet reveals Pierre’s secret, it is not coincidental that Plinlimmon’s face is emphasized more than once. After moving into the New York apartment, Pierre is continually confronted with Plinlimmon’s face, which he sees repeatedly in the opposite building: “[T]he blue-eyed, mystic-mild face in the upper window of the old gray tower began to domineer in a very remarkable manner upon Pierre” (292). Plinlimmon’s
face frightens Pierre precisely because it seems to know his secret: "What was most terrible was the idea that by some magical means or other the face had got hold of his secret. 'Ay,' shuddered Pierre, 'the face knows that Isabel is not my wife! And that seems the reason it leers.'" Pierre tries to use a curtain to hide the face, but "still the face leered behind the muslin" (293). Plinlimmon's face as well as his pamphlet is portrayed as something from which Pierre's eyes must be averted.

We can see this "mystic face" as another letter which reveals Pierre's secret to himself just as Plinlimmon's pamphlet does. As argued earlier, it is characteristic of Plinlimmon's face that despite its being a human face, it is deprived of humanness. Renker, finding a connection between the words "pane" and "page," regards Plinlimmon's face which Pierre sees in the window pane as an "exteriorized and verticalized page" (Renker 37). She goes on to assert that Plinlimmon is "the pamphlet itself, part of the novel's conversion of three dimensions into two" (Renker 40). While we basically agree with her argument that sees a human face as a text, our emphasis here is rather that Plinlimmon is not just a pamphlet, but one of the letters privately addressed to Pierre. If Plinlimmon is Pierre's secret double who embodies Pierre's unconscious recognition that his self-sacrifice for saving Isabel is not motivated by the Christly self-renunciation, then Plinlimmon's pamphlet can be considered as a secret writing in Pierre's heart that comes out to the surface.

If the writings Pierre reads are what comes out to the surface from within, then it should come as no surprise that letters always appear out of nowhere and mysteriously reach Pierre, for they are already written inside him. In light of such possibility, it is not a coincidence that, in the chapter prior to the one in which Plinlimmon's pamphlet appears, Pierre's blackened hand is given exceptional focus (201). Although his hand is blackened when he burns his father's portrait, now we can understand its blackness in a different light. If, as we shall argue later in detail, the blackness in Pierre is linked to the ink's blackness, Pierre's blackened hand suggests that Plinlimmon's pamphlet, written in "blurred ink" (206), comes out of Pierre's own hand. His hand's blackness seems to suggest that black ink, which metaphorically runs through Pierre's veins as his black blood, seeps out of his body onto the surface. The black stain actually comes from inside. Figuratively speaking, Pierre's body is his post office which continually issues letters of his own writing and never fails
to reach the right addressee. The post office is "a little round the corner from where he was" (285), but it is also found within himself. Letters come not from outside, but from inside. A possibility suggested by this reading is that the hooded messenger who hands Isabel's letter to Pierre is Pierre himself, who is also the author of this letter.

2. Dangerous Knowledge

The word "scroll" is frequently used in Pierre. Pierre's life is described as an "illuminated scroll" (7) and Lucy's body is figured as a "scroll" (360). Additionally, Isabel's letter "seemed the fit scroll of a torn, as well as bleeding heart" (65). Or, Pierre "unfingered and unbolted" Plinlimmon's pamphlet, and "unrolled it, and carefully smoothed it, to see what it might be" (206). The repeated reference to writing as a "scroll," a word meaning rolled paper, implies that a written message is not always there open to read, but it often requires a reader's active engagement in order to "unroll" and decipher it. Isabel's letter is a case in point. After opening the letter, Pierre is confronted with a decision, since in the middle of this letter Isabel urges Pierre to stop reading: "Read no further. If it suit thee, burn this letter; so shalt thou escape the certainty of that knowledge" (64). What is crucial here is that it is left up to Pierre whether to read this "tremendous note"; the act of reading letters depends on his decision to read them or not.

What emerges as a fundamental problem from the foregoing discussion of letters is Pierre's desire for and avoidance of self-knowledge, both of which exist in his psyche. The act of reading is conceived as deeply linked to dangerous knowledge about oneself, and the words "know" and "knowledge" comprise the key terms in reading Pierre. For example, Pierre expresses his desire to "know" to Isabel: "I desire to know all, Isabel, and yet, nothing which thou wilt not voluntarily disclose." But he feels that he already knows all he has to know: "I feel that already I know the pith of all; that already I feel toward thee to the very limit of all; and that, whatever remains for thee to tell me, can but corroborate and confirm" (145). Despite his desire to know, as cited above, Isabel's letter initially urges Pierre to "[r]ead no further," so that he can "escape the certainty of that knowledge" (64). Moreover, when describing Plinlimmon's pamphlet, the narrator suggestively writes: "[T]o comprehend, is himself to condemn himself" (209). Although Pierre's "pure,
exalted idea of his father” was “based upon the known acknowledged facts of his father’s life” (82), the hitherto unknown presence of Isabel crushes his purified idea of his father, confronting him with unacknowledged facts about his father.

In Pierre’s conflict between “to know” and “not to know,” or the one between “to read” and “not to read,” the latter seems to prevail, thus deferring the critical moment of his self-knowledge. Pierre repeatedly uses the word “acknowledge” in the sense that he “recognizes” Isabel’s presence as his sister: “Thou art my sister and I am thy brother; and that part of the world which knows me, shall acknowledge thee” (160). However, his peculiar decision to marry Isabel in order to effectively protect her from the world’s rebuke seems to disguise his ulterior desire to avoid “acknowledging” Isabel in the true sense of the word. Significantly, the word “acknowledge” can mean to “confess” (OED). In a sense, by marrying Isabel and by making himself not her brother, he attempts to disentangle himself from his consanguinity to Isabel, thereby exonerating his father from his blackened past. Pierre’s acknowledgement of Isabel in the form of marriage can be interpreted as his attempt to avoid acknowledging Isabel as his sister, and as a manifestation of his intense desire to protect his father, rather than Isabel.

Pierre represents a closed postal system in which letters circulate incessantly without a fixed place to rest; he is a writer, a messenger, and a reader of the same letter. The paradox is that, even though the letters always physically reach Pierre, they never “reach” the addressee in the strict sense of the word. Indeed, Pierre receives them, but not as the ones addressed to himself, as can be seen in his carelessly losing Plinlimmon’s pamphlet. The letters Pierre writes to himself are essentially misdelivered, and they become dead letters, as long as he blinds himself to his secrets. For the resurrection of a dead letter to occur, the presence of an appreciative reader is indispensable. But in Pierre’s case, he is constantly figured as an incompetent reader who fails and refuses to read.

As we have used the term “dead letter,” it is necessary to define what a dead letter signifies in the context of our discussion thus far. In The Post Card, Jacques Derrida writes of a “dead letter,” understanding it as a letter without any assignable address to reach and without the sender’s address, a letter that goes astray from the postal route (The Post Card 50, 124, 137). When he likens philosophers to a post office by saying that “a great thinker is always somewhat
a great post" (32), he implies that the thoughts delivered via philosophers are
subject to the possibility of misdelivery, a possibility that they can go astray on
their way to the addressee. In short, Derrida’s emphasis is placed on the
fallibility of the postal system which can lead to the misdelivery of letters. The
letters in Pierre, however, never fail to physically reach their designated
addressee. As argued earlier, Plinlimmon’s pamphlet written in “blurred ink”
comes out of Pierre’s “blackened hand,” a hand signifying ink’s blackness. As
long as the letters come from the inside of the addressee, the postal system is
infallible. The letters delivered to Pierre are misdelivered not because of the
postal network, but because of his refusal to read them. Dead letters in Pierre
are characterized by these two aspects: the infallible postal network and the
incompetent reader.

3. Infernally Black Ink/Kin

There are many references to liquids in Pierre, the most prominent of which
are blood and ink. These two liquids, though different nearly in every respect,
seem to function as one liquid. They are often mixed upon the surface of a
letter, both literally and figuratively. For example, Isabel’s letter to Pierre is
stained with red blots on its sheet. The narrator describes her letter as “stained,
too, here and there, with spots of tears, which chemically acted upon by the
ink, assumed a strange and reddish hue—as if blood and not tears had dropped
upon the sheet” (64–65). Melville’s insistence on ink’s transmutation into
blood is unmistakable, for later on Pierre describes this chemical change with
particular emphasis: “[T]hy tears dried not fair, but dried red, almost like
blood” (159). Inexplicably, Isabel’s tears, which she dropped on the sheet
while writing, changed her writing written in black ink into red blood.5 This is
of course an impossible chemical effect, and it forces us to ask what motivated
Melville to mix ink and blood in so idiosyncratic a way.

The focus on blood here is important not so much because it signifies Isabel’s
anguish, as because the act of writing and the problem of kinship are in-
dissolubly merged in this mixture of the liquids. Of great significance here is
Cindy Weinstein’s remark on the function of blood in Pierre: “Blood functions
as a metonymy for the family relations which persist” (Weinstein 38). In this
novel, ink/writing and blood/kinship are compounded. Isabel’s letter both
literally and figuratively delivers blood to him; literally, because it bears the
blood-stain on its sheet, and figuratively, because this letter divulges Pierre's hitherto unknown albeit unascertainable blood-relation to him. Significantly, blackness of Pierre's "vein" is more than once emphasized. Millthorpe mystically speaks about Pierre's "black" and "dark" vein (358, 362). In Pierre's body, now we can imagine, black blood flows through black veins. Suppose Pierre's blood is a black liquid, then there arises a possibility that Pierre is drawn as a written creation whose blood is black ink.

In focusing on Pierre's insistent representations of "blackness," we should also note that the narrator describes the ink in which Pierre writes his novel as "infernally black ink" (302). Let us note here the narrator's strong emphasis on the ink's evil blackness. Ink invites Pierre to hell. We can anagrammatize this word "ink" into "kin," a word meaning blood-relation. Given that ink is repeatedly associated with blood, and that the problem of writing and that of kinship are closely linked in this novel, this anagram, which fluctuates between these two important issues in Pierre, begins to appear more than coincidental. If ink is mixed with blood and if ink implies "kin," the act of writing a novel, which seems to insure Pierre's independent authorship, actually collapses such an enterprise, for as he writes, "black" ink/kin becomes visible on the "white" surface of paper. Edgar A. Dryden emphasizes that Pierre is more a reader than a writer: "The life of its [Pierre's] hero is the story of a reader who attempts to become a writer" (Dryden 173). The act of writing, however, runs concomitant with that of reading the black ink which the author puts upon the white paper. Pierre's writing a novel, an act with which he aims to attain an "ever-present self" freed of kinship ties (199), is always accompanied by the reading of his black ink/kin upon the white paper.

That Pierre's blood is black ink/kin suggests that his ancestors, whom he reveres greatly, are actually "infernally black kin." Pierre's black ink/kin does not merely hint at his father's secret past, but also implies his trouble with his forefathers. Recently, critics have paid significantly greater attention to the racial and historical aspects of Pierre, thereby revealing the history of Pierre's family to be impure and dishonorable. For example, Samuel Otter reveals that the landscape of Saddle Meadows, which Pierre often looks upon reverently for the glory of his ancestors it suggests, is actually saturated with the bloody past of which Pierre seems unaware. Otter argues that "Saddle Meadows has been 'sanctified' through blood, particularly the blood of Indian battles" (Otter
195). In addition, building his argument on Otter’s insights into the racial and historical issues in *Pierre*, Robert S. Levine discusses Pierre’s “blackened hand” by associating it with the history of slavery in America, thus suggesting Pierre’s possible miscegenetic origin.

Commonly stressed in these arguments is the idea that the origin of supposedly renowned genealogy of Pierre’s family is impure and unknown, and that his family has thrived on slavery and the domination of Indians. And most importantly, they point out Pierre’s inability to “read” what lies behind his seemingly renowned genealogy. For example, Levine discusses Pierre’s unawareness of his family’s history: “Pierre, in focusing on the possibility of the father’s secret paternity, may be missing sight of the more pressing question of secret paternity by his grandfather” (Levine 34). Underlying these arguments is a presupposition that Pierre is naïvely unaware of an unread historical narrative. But it seems that Pierre is less naïve than these critics tend to suppose, for as he writes, he is forced to look at the ink, which damages his eyes. Significantly, Pierre begins to lose sight as the story proceeds. His loss of sight is concomitant with his refusal to see paper’s surface: “He had abused them [his eyes] so recklessly, that now they absolutely refused to look on paper. He turned them on paper, and they blinked and shut” (341). Our discussion thus far suggests that Pierre is vaguely aware of the uncomfortable facts about his family. To leave letters unread with a vague awareness of their content is altogether different from leaving them unread without any awareness of their presence.

In *Pierre*, familial genealogy is analogous to the aggression of the postal network. Generally speaking, we can say that letters are essentially aggressive in that they reach their address whether a recipient wants them or not. The recipient is vulnerable and passive to the letter’s approach. Pierre’s security found in his private room in New York is violently disrupted by the letters which resurrect Lucy and Mary in his consciousness. Pierre’s vulnerability to those letters overlaps precisely with his exposure to the threat of blood-relations; Pierre cannot choose his blood as it inevitably runs through his veins.

4. “All’s o’er, and ye know him not!”

The conflict between Pierre and the letters is suddenly brought to an end by
his suicide. This ending, however, is rendered rather unnaturally by Melville, who, as if at a loss for how to put an end to this unending drama of kinship, seems to be hurried into finishing the novel with the protagonist's death. The deaths of Pierre, Lucy, and Isabel take place abruptly; all three of them occur within just three pages. Shocked when she learns of the blood ties of Pierre and Isabel, Lucy dies on the spot. Pierre and Isabel kill themselves with the drug which Isabel mysteriously keeps in her bosom. What emerges from a close attention to this "end" is the question of whether Melville, when completing his story, really ended Pierre's conflict with the letters.

After Pierre's suicide, an unknown voice comes from the wall of his prison cell: "All's o'er, and ye know him not!" came gasping from the wall" (362). Naturally, the question of whose voice this is has baffled critics and readers alike. For example, Renker reads these words as coming from Isabel (Renker 37). Her view is quite tenable, for before that voice comes out from the wall, Isabel "reclined between, against the wall" (362). From a completely different perspective, Richard Gray sees them as coming from Pierre: "It [the voice] could be Pierre himself, talking to the other characters, or indeed to the narrator and the reader" (Gray 131).

Although Gray's view that the voice might be Pierre's is tempting, it is doubtful that this voice speaks to "the narrator and the reader" as he suggests. We have seen earlier that the word "know" comprises a key term for this novel, and that the letters create an arena where Pierre's conflict with self-knowledge is played out. Taken in this context, the word "know" in the line under question tempts us to read it as another mark that speaks to Pierre's difficulty with accepting self-knowledge. A possibility is that "ye" and "him" both refer to Pierre himself; Pierre is split into "ye" and "him" in this line. In this view, "ye know him not" can be roughly translated into "I don't know myself." This interpretation is pertinent for our discussion, for we have seen how Pierre refuses to know himself by refusing to read the letters in which his secret and unconscious are revealed. An important point to note here is that there is no "I" in this line. There is a huge difference between saying "I don't know myself" and saying "You don't know him." This absence of "I" seems to testify Pierre's difficulty in designating himself as "I."

Melville is quite scrupulous in depriving Pierre of his right to say "I." In response to Isabel's call "my brother," Pierre furiously proclaims, "I am
Pierre” (274). When he says so, he means that he is neither Isabel’s brother nor her husband, but just “himself” apart from any relational roles whatsoever. But what is at stake in Pierre is the question of whether a being independent of any relations as such is possible. Even when he says “I am Pierre,” he unwittingly embroils himself in the familial relations, for “Pierre” is the name of both his father (73) and his grandfather (29-30). The irony which incessantly confronts Pierre is that he cannot refer to himself other than by saying “I am Pierre.” As soon as he designates himself that way, the subject “I” disintegrates into the plurality of “Pierre.” Despite the fact that Pierre, unlike other protagonists in Melville’s fiction, is given a proper name, his name does not actually function as a definite identity. When viewed in this light, it can be said that the split between “ye” and “him” symbolizes Pierre’s difficulty in finding a stable self.

As long as letters remain unread, no responses to them can be written. As argued earlier, what characterizes the letters in Pierre is that they are not exchanged between the characters. We have also seen the possibility that these letters are the texts written by Pierre to himself, divulging that which is beneath the surface. Given this, the absence of correspondence in Pierre can be better understood as the problem of Pierre’s split self, not that of his relationships with other characters. The absence of “correspondence” as a word meaning the “exchange of letters” seems to be inextricably tied to the thematization of another absence of “correspondence,” the “identification” between what Pierre believes himself to be and what the letters force him to recognize as himself. These letters, which presume to constitute correspondence, only highlight its absence. By refusing to read the letters and respond to them, Pierre fails to reconcile the contradiction within him. That Pierre dies refusing to read the letters suggests that there is no correspondence achieved even at the very end of the novel.

Our discussion, beginning with the aim of exploring how writing and kinship are related in Pierre, has focused mainly on Pierre’s act of reading. Despite his strong yearning for an original authorship freed of kinship ties, Pierre is assailed by an array of letters which resurrects the buried memory of his dead family members. His attempt to write a novel requires him to read infernally black ink/kin upon the surface of paper. For Pierre, writing and reading are concomitant with each other, always the latter balking the former’s success.
Pierre offers a nightmarish vision in which kinship disrupts Pierre’s yearning for an original authorial self. In this novel, Melville literalized his own concept of genealogy, an extreme recognition that “no one is his own sire.”

Notes
1 Gillian Silverman, for instance, focuses on the relation between incest and writing in Pierre. Another important critic in this vein, Cindy Weinstein, by pointing out the repetitious use of words including “kin” such as kindred and akin, attempts to bridge the ways in which Pierre is written and the theme of kinship.
2 This claim, however, has to be qualified to some extent, given the narrator’s minute recording of Pierre’s ardent correspondence with his cousin Glen (226–27). But this correspondence is described as what took place before this novel begins. At issue in our discussion is the series of letters that begins with Isabel’s letter.
3 In Pierre, the act of burning paper is repeatedly described. Pierre burns his father’s portrait (198), the letters he received from his cousin Glen Stanly (217), the letters from his “silly correspondents” (255–56), and his past writings (282). There is no doubt that the repetition of burning letters in Pierre is a direct reflection of Melville’s own habit. In a letter to Sophia Van Matre, Melville confesses that “it is a vile habit of mine to destroy nearly all my letters” (387).
4 As several critics have argued, Melville’s insistence on the words “know” and “knowledge” is unmistakable. While our argument on “knowledge” is concerned with Pierre’s self-knowledge, other critics focus on this word from different perspectives. For important discussions of this issue, see Brodhead 188–89; Dimock 150–75; Strickland 304.
5 For discussions of the ink’s transmutation into blood, see Oshima 5; Otter 247–48; Weinstein 38.
6 If we confine our discussion to the works written before Pierre, all the protagonists, except Redburn, do not have or reveal their real names.

Works Cited


