WHEN Herman Melville died on September 28, 1891, he left an estate worth $13,261.31. When his wife died on July 31, 1906, her property was appraised at $170,369.62. This information may be a surprise to those who have imagined that the Melvilles subsisted on air after the death of Elizabeth Melville’s father in 1861 (by which time Melville had almost ceased to write for the general book market), and on his custom-house salary after 1866. The fact is, however, that his situation was neither so bad as tradition suggests, nor so prosperous as these bare figures might lead one to think. At any rate, an investigation of the two wills and of Melville’s financial condition after 1851 throws much light on his later years.¹

Melville’s holograph will, which is preserved in the Hall of Records in New York City, is as follows:

New York City

I, Herman Melville, declare this to be my will. Any property, of whatever kind, I may die possessed of, including money in banks, and my share in the as yet undivided real estate at Gansevoort, I bequeathe to my wife. I do this because I have confidence that through her our children and grand-children will get their proportion of any benefit that may accrue.—I appoint my wife executrix of this will.—In witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand and seal this 11th day of June 1888.

Herman Melville
Signed and sealed by the above-named Herman Melville as his last will, in presence of us who at his request and in his presence and in the presence of each other have hereunto subscribed our names as witnesses.

H. Minturn Smith  
S. N. Robinson  
H. B. Thomas  

The will itself is less interesting than the appraisal of the estate, which was made on March 28, 1892, and filed on May 3, 1892:

Cash
7 $1,000. U. S. 4% Registered Bonds (of the market value of $1.16 1/8 at the time of decedent's death) $4,532.56
Personal books numbering about 1,000 volumes 8,128.75
Copyright of two works expiring in 1892 and 1893, which give no income and have no market value 600.

Expenses
Last illness $413.  
Funeral 474.35
Legal fees 170.
Commissions allowed by statute 307.

Net value 11,896.96
Transfer tax 118.97

One asks at once how and when Melville managed to accumulate almost $13,000 in cash and bonds, but some minor points about these documents should be settled first.
1. *The library.*—It is well known that Melville was an assiduous book-buyer even in his leanest days, but the $600 valuation on his library turned out to be wildly optimistic. According to Oscar Wegelin, who, in his youth, worked in a bookstore which Melville patronized, Elizabeth learned the bitter truth about secondhand bookdealers when she failed to realize more than $110 from the sale of the whole collection.  

2. *Copyrights.*—By the laws in effect in 1892, an author had control of his work for twenty-eight years, plus fourteen years if he or his widow or children were living, making a total of forty-two years. Thus the copyrights expiring in 1892 and 1893 must have been *White-Jacket* and *Moby-Dick*, published in 1850 and 1851. That these copyrights had “no value” would seem to be a pathetic comment on Melville’s reputation at the time of his death. But Elizabeth Melville was in error, for in 1892 the United States Book Company brought out new editions, under her copyright, of four of Melville’s works: *Typee*, *Omoo*, *White-Jacket*, and *Moby-Dick*. Moreover, in 1897 she wrote that the paper edition of these four works published in 1896 had had “a very good sale.” One wonders, however, why the appraisal contains no reference to the six works (other than the privately printed poems) published after *Moby-Dick*. Obviously they would not have been omitted from the inventory merely because they had “no value.” It seems probable, therefore, either that Melville sold the six copyrights on publication or at some time when he was badly in need of the money, or that he neglected to renew them at the end of the twenty-eight-year period.

3. *Real estate.*—It will be noted that the Gansevoort property (near Saratoga Springs, New York) mentioned in the will is not listed in the inventory. This property was deeded to Melville and his brother Allan by their uncle, Peter Gansevoort, in December, 1848; was held in trust by them for a time; and finally was conveyed to Melville’s sister, Frances Priscilla. When the latter died in 1885, she seems to have left the property to Melville and other members of the family. But on September 1, 1888, about three
months after Melville made his will, the property was sold at auction. Inasmuch as Melville gave receipt on March 16, 1889, for $1,123.79, "being my portion under [the] will of the remainder of the estate of said Priscilla F. Melville," it would seem that the clause referring to the Gansevoort property became irrelevant before Melville died but that he neglected to change the will accordingly.

It should be noted also that in neither the will nor the appraisal is there any reference to the Melville house at 104 East 26th Street, New York City, although Melville's biographers say that he bought and paid for it with his wife's legacies. The Records of Conveyances at the Hall of Records show that the house was the property of Elizabeth; that she bought it from Allan Melville on April 25, 1863, for $7,750 and the Arrowhead place in Pittsfield (which also belonged to her, not to him, as is usually stated); and sold it on April 15, 1892, after Melville's death, for $16,250.

The major question, of course, is Melville's sources of income. During the first five years of his literary life (1846-51) Melville seems to have made a good living from his writings. A document in Allan Melville's hand shows that by April 29, 1851, Melville had realized from the English and American sales of his first five books and the English sale of his sixth—Moby-Dick—a total of $8,069.34—an average of over $1,600 a year for five years. Few American authors in the first half of the nineteenth century made as good a financial showing. But income seems to have been exceeded by outgo, for in spite of his success Melville owed, in 1851, $695.65 to the Harpers and at least $5,000 to Judge Shaw. For the next few years the American sales of his works held up fairly well. The Harpers advanced him $500 in February, 1852, and $300 in December, 1853, but from then until 1864 he was
in debt to his publishers and drew nothing. Such royalties as accrued were applied to his debt until February 9, 1864, when Melville paid the Harpers $200. From then until 1887, when the records stop, his income from this source was negligible.

I have no information about Melville’s income from books brought out by other publishers, but it appears that no one of them had a large sale. Moreover, Putnam was forced to sell the plates of *Israel Potter* during the panic of 1857, and Dix and Edwards, publishers of *The Piazza Tales* and *The Confidence-Man*, went bankrupt in the same year. Melville’s dealings with English publishers after he sold *Moby-Dick* to Bentley for £150 have not yet been investigated, but Arthur Stedman stated that about 1851 the “English rights in *Typee* and *Omoo* had been bought outright by a London publisher for small sums and were held by him until Melville’s death, so that soon all income from ‘oversea’ was ended.”

When his income from books began to fail, Melville turned to other outlets. Between 1853 and 1856 he contributed *Israel Potter*, fourteen essays and stories, and a few poems to *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine* and *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, for which he probably received a little over $725—an average of about $240 a year. From 1857 to 1860, lecturing brought him gross receipts of $1,273.50—an average of $423 a year.

After 1853, then, Melville’s income from literary work seems to have been meager. It should be remembered, however, that during this period he had no rent to pay, and that he was probably able to support himself to some extent by farming at Arrowhead.

But what of the years from 1860 to 1866 when he had almost no income from magazines, lectures, or books, and during the
latter half of which he did not even have a farm? It is true that in 1862 he received a small legacy—$900—from his Aunt Priscilla, but that could not have lasted long. The solution of the problem is obvious when we remember that it was Elizabeth Melville who paid for the New York house two years after her father died. Though everyone is aware that Judge Shaw was generous to the Melvilles while he lived, no one has considered what his death must have meant to them in terms of financial relief.

Lemuel Shaw died on March 30, 1861. In his will, dated October 4, 1860, he directed that the bulk of his estate be divided equally among his wife, his three sons, and his daughter Elizabeth. The inventory of the estate, filed July 26, 1861, showed a gross valuation of $114,320. After debts, expenses, and special bequests had been paid, Elizabeth's fifth share amounted to $15,114.27. This sum was, apparently (the records are not quite clear), paid out to her in three separate instalments during the years 1861-62.

There was no bequest for Melville, though he signed one of the probate documents as an interested party. But the will itself contains some interesting references to him. One clause runs as follows:

And whereas since the marriage of my said daughter, I have loaned and advanced to her said husband, certain sums of money, I do hereby release, exonerate and discharge the said Herman Melville from all debts, dues and demands for any such loan made to him or on his account.

Inasmuch as Shaw had canceled all of Melville's debts to him five months before he drew his will, in return for title to Arrowhead which he then transferred to his daughter, it is likely that this provision was mere legal formality.

Still another clause refers to a hitherto unknown marriage contract:

Item. Whereas at the marriage of my daughter with her present husband Herman Melville, a certain fund of three thousand
dollars was placed in trust under a certain contract or marriage contract and settlement between the said Herman Melville of the first part, the said Elizabeth V. [error for "K."] Shaw of the second part, and the said Curtis and myself of the third part, to which reference is to be had for the more particular provisions and trusts thereof; and whereas the principal of said fund of three thousand dollars has ever since remained in my hands and has not been specially invested,—I do order and direct my executors, unless the same shall be invested in my life-time,—to pay over to said Benjamin R. Curtis, surviving trustee, the said sum of three thousand dollars to be held and invested, and the income and principal thereof to be appropriated and disposed of according to the trusts and terms of said contract and marriage settlement.

It would seem, therefore, that during the difficult years after 1853 the Melvilles had a backlog in this small trust fund, and that from 1861 to 1866 they must have been almost completely dependent upon it and the bequest, a sum totaling about $18,114. At 6 per cent this would have brought in an income of over $1,000 a year: but if, as is likely, the New York house was paid for out of the bequest, the principal must have been cut by $7,750 in 1863.

Secure as this income may have been, it was too small for the father of four children (whose ages, in 1866, ranged from eleven to seventeen), and especially for a man whose house seems frequently to have been full of relatives. It was, therefore, a financial as well as a moral necessity for Melville to obtain employment. On December 6, 1866, he was appointed Inspector of Customs in the District of New York at a salary of four dollars a day—approximately $1,250 a year, though this was probably reduced by annual party assessments. Together with income from the funds, this should have provided an adequate living, particularly
since the Melvilles owned their New York house. Money for "extras" was occasionally provided by more well-to-do relatives. It appears from a letter of Elizabeth’s in 1872 that Melville’s uncle, Peter Gansevoort, made a gift of money when misfortune, the nature of which is not entirely clear, was suffered by the family:

The fire is the all absorbing topic, and friends on every side have met with losses greater or less—I have plenty to keep me company—but I feel so much relieved by your father’s kind and generous gift to Herman (removing the necessity of renting our house or part of it, which I feared) that I can bear my loss with equanimity.\(^\text{21}\)

It is well known that the same uncle gave $1,200 for the printing of *Clarel* (1876), and Melville must have benefited by any sales of a book on which the publisher took no risk. It is not generally known, however, that in 1877 Melville received a bequest of $500 from Peter Gansevoort.\(^\text{22}\) In 1876 Elizabeth’s brother Lemuel paid for the Melvilles’ vacation trip to the White Mountains, and in the following year a bequest of $100 from a relative enabled her to make badly needed improvements in her back parlor.\(^\text{23}\)

Unfortunately, Melville’s government job was not entirely secure, for, like Hawthorne, he was of little practical use to the party in power, and at least twice he was threatened with removal. One of the worst nests of corruption in Roscoe Conkling’s machine, the New York Customhouse was under the constant surveillance of civil service reformers.\(^\text{24}\) In 1877, early in Hayes’s administration, the Jay Commission investigated irregularities at the customhouse, then ruled by Collector Chester A. Arthur. As might be expected, the commission found a heavily overloaded staff and evidence of bribery. No scandal seems to have touched Melville’s name,\(^\text{25}\) though his salary and the date of his accession to office appeared in lists of officeholders which were sent to Congress.\(^\text{26}\) Nevertheless, his job was in jeopardy.
As a result of the investigation, Secretary of the Treasury Sherman ordered that the staff be reduced 20 per cent by June 30, 1877, and two hundred employees were dropped. It is barely possible that a literary man saved Melville, for one of the committee of three employees whom Arthur selected to draw up the list for decapitation was Richard Grant White, the Shakespearian scholar. As it turned out, Melville was affected only by a general increase in working hours, from ten-to-three to nine-to-four daily. His reaction to all this was apparently stoical. On May 7, 1877, he wrote to a relative, “Now about President Hayes? I chanced to turn over a file of your Albany Argus yesterday, and was all but blown off the stool by the tremendous fulmination of that indignant sheet.—But what’s the use? life is short and Hayes’ term is four years, each of 365 days.”

On the other hand, there is a possible reference to quite a different mood in a letter which his wife wrote on June 5, 1877: “—poor fellow he has so much mental suffering to undergo (and oh how all unnecessary) I am rejoiced when anything comes into his life to give him even a moment’s relief.”

A second threat came in 1885, when Elizabeth wrote Catherine Lansing, “Of course there have been removals, and he may be removed any day,” and suggested that she ask her husband, Abraham Lansing, who was politically influential in New York State, to intercede for Melville. Within six months, however, she wrote the Lansings again, thanking them for their efforts but informing them that Melville had resigned on December 31, 1885.

The reasons she gave the Lansings for Melville’s resignation were age and ill health, but financial considerations must have entered into it. In August, 1885, Melville’s sister Frances had
died, and he was undoubtedly looking forward to the liquidation of the Gansevoort property on which she had lived but in which he had an interest. By the will of his sister he received, on August 19, 1886, $3,019.50; on October 15, $96.49, which was intended for his son Stanwix, then dead; and on March 16, 1889, $1,123.79—a total of $4,239.78. By the same will his wife and his daughter Elizabeth received unknown, but probably smaller, amounts. These facts have been generally overlooked in discussions of Melville's decision to retire. Quite rightly, emphasis has been put on the legacy which Elizabeth Melville received from her brother at about that time, but hitherto details have been lacking.

The will of Lemuel Shaw, Jr., was signed June 27, 1882, and the executors' inventory, filed December 3, 1884, evaluated the estate at $323,450.70. According to the will, the residue of the estate was to be divided equally between Elizabeth and her two brothers, John and Samuel. Elizabeth's share was $37,949.20, but inasmuch as we are interested only in the amount received before Melville's death, it should be noted that $33,516.67 was paid to her before that time. In addition, the three Melville children (Stanwix, Elizabeth, and Frances) received $2,000 each.

For the rest of the financial facts, we must turn to Elizabeth Melville's will, which was signed on October 11, 1905. It is a comforting thought that the writer's widow and children were well provided for; but, except for a few matters which bear upon his interests, the details of the will and its administration are irrelevant. The two daughters shared equally the residue of the estate, Elizabeth receiving in addition $16,250, "being the sum realized from the sale of my house and lot at 104 East 26th Street, New York, which property was given to her by me in a former will." Another clause shows that Melville's wish that his children should benefit by his estate was scrupulously carried out by his wife, who bequeathed to Elizabeth a special sum of $5,000, representing "a portion of her father's estate devised to me," a like sum having already been paid to Frances.
Of special interest among the probate documents is a deposition, made on June 12, 1907, by H. B. Thomas, her son-in-law and executor, that “at the time of her death she had no copyrights, nor any interest therein; that for several years before her death he had collected her income and during that time she had received nothing from copyrights.”

Obviously more facts are needed to complete this picture, for the legacies and earnings listed are not sufficient to account for the size of Melville’s estate—particularly when one considers that his funds must have been reduced by his private publication of *John Marr* and *Timoleon* in 1888 and 1891. Furthermore, his records of accounts with the Harpers have not been thoroughly studied, and little or nothing is known of his business relations with his other publishers—Putnam, and Dix and Edwards, or with his English publishers after 1851. Nevertheless, the major sources of his income are known, and tentative conclusions may be drawn.

From 1846 to 1851 Melville was a financially successful author, able to support his family by his writings. From 1851 to 1866, during which time his literary work tapered off, his income from magazine contributions, lectures, and from books published by Harpers, was about $3,430, an average of $228 a year; but inasmuch as the bulk of this income was earned by 1861, it is more useful to know that for this period of ten years he averaged at least $320. This was insufficient, of course, and only the trust fund and the legacies of 1861-1862 made it possible for him to do without a job until 1866. His luck in respect to legacies was phenomenal, for he and his family received a total (including the trust fund) of at least $63,370 during his life, and, through the generosity of his father-in-law, they lived rent-free from 1851 on.
"[Household] economy is a science, and must be devoutly studied," wrote Emerson.\textsuperscript{35} Of such science, Melville seems to have been innocent. This, of course, is no reflection on either his personal or his artistic integrity; yet it and such information as I have here given must be considered in any discussion of that important but neglected problem—the relation between Melville's (or any author's) works and the financial and domestic strains which he endured. The conclusion that Melville was a poor manager seems inescapable, for even at the height of his literary fortunes he was heavily in debt. His wife wrote to a friend in 1872: "Herman from his studious habits and tastes being unfitted for practical matters, all the financial management falls upon me—and one cannot make bricks without straw—you know."\textsuperscript{36} When one remembers that in spite of connections with such powerful political figures as Judge Shaw, R. H. Dana, Jr., Abraham Lansing, Peter Gansevoort, and Marcus Morton, Melville was unable to get a political appointment better than an inspectorship, it is possible to infer that this estimate of his practical ability was shared by his relatives and acquaintances.

1. Willard Thorp has collected some of the details of Melville's later life in "Herman Melville's Silent Years," \textit{University Review}, III (Summer, 1937), 254-62.

2. In other documents Robinson deposed that he had known Melville for more than three years before his death; Thomas (Melville's son-in-law), that he had known him for fourteen years; and both, that Melville was of sound mind when he made his will.


4. See the \textit{American Catalogue} for 1890-95 and 1895-1900; and Meade Minnigerode, \textit{Some Personal Letters of Herman Melville and a Bibliography} (New York, 1922). The bibliographical facts about these editions (supposedly edited by Arthur Stedman) are by no means clear. The latter explains in his Introduction to the 1892 edition of \textit{Typee} that he made minor changes in the text, which, together with the Introduction, explains the occasion for a new copyright.


7. Ibid., p. 64.

8. The transfer of Arrowhead to Allan does not appear in these records, but that title passed from Melville to his wife in 1860 is made clear in a letter from her father to Melville, May 15, 1860 (Raymond Weaver, *Herman Melville, Mariner and Mystic* [New York, 1921], pp. 366-69).

9. For this information and the details on Melville's business with Harper and Brothers, I am indebted to Professor Raymond Weaver, who has generously allowed me to use his copies of Melville's manuscript accounts, which are now a part of the Herman Melville Collection in the Houghton Library at Harvard University. Subsequently, the Committee on Higher Degrees in the History of American Civilization at Harvard University permitted me to examine the original manuscripts for the purpose of checking some of the details and general conclusions.


13. This estimate is based on a count of the pages of Melville's contributions at the rate of $3.00 a page, which, according to F. L. Mott (*A History of American Magazines, 1850-1865* [Cambridge, Mass., 1938], pp. 20, 21) was "normal" for Putnam's and probably for Harper's.


15. Ibid., p. 258.

16. Case No. 43419, Probate records, Suffolk County Probate Court, Boston.


18. I have not found the marriage contract. It should be noted that such arrangements were very common in the nineteenth century. Another document, dated June 3, 1861, indicates that the contract was made on August 2, 1847 (two days before the marriage) and that Curtis resigned the trusteeship to Elizabeth's brothers, Lemuel and Samuel.

19. Information from the Treasury Department.


22. Records of the Surrogate's Court of Albany County, Albany, New York. The will was proved December 6, 1876. This is probably the matter referred to in Elizabeth's letter to Gansevoort's daughter on June 5, 1877 (*Family Correspondence*, p. 50). It probably also explains the painting, renovation, and new furniture described in her letter of October 9, 1877 (*ibid.*, pp. 52-53).

23. *Family Correspondence*, p. 56.

25. Elizabeth Melville, January 10, 1886: "This month was a good turning point, completing 19 years of faithful service, during which there has not been a single complaint against him—So he retires honorably of his own accord."—Family Correspondence, p. 62.

28. Family Correspondence, p. 47.
29. Ibid., p. 50.
30. Ibid., p. 61.
31. Ibid., p. 62.
32. Ibid., pp. 62–64.
33. Case No. 71419, Probate records, Suffolk County Probate Court, Boston.
34. Probate records, Hall of Records, New York City. She died July 31, 1906.
35. R. L. Rusk (ed.), The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson (New York, 1939), II, 64.
36. Family Correspondence, pp. 28–29.