



Israel Potter

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Characters Discussed

Israel Potter, a wanderer. Brought up in the rugged New England hills and immersed in their austere virtues, he quarrels with his father and leaves home. He wanders about, the innocent American, for fifty years, and in the course of his many adventures, he becomes the spokesman through whom the author satirizes various ideas and institutions, among them war, patriotism, and so-called civilized behavior.

King George III, whom Israel Potter meets in London. The mad king, realizing that Israel is an American, is ineffectually kind to him after the many snubs Israel has received because of his nationality.

Squire Woodcock, a secret friend of America who befriends Israel Potter and sends him on a mission to Benjamin Franklin.

Benjamin Franklin, who gives Israel Potter lessons in proper behavior based on maxims from *Poor Richard's Almanack*. The lessons, carefully learned, are quickly forgotten.

John Paul Jones, with whom Israel Potter engages in piracy and in the sea fight between the *Bon Homme Richard* and the *Serapis*.

The earl of Selkirk, whose home is plundered by the pirate companions of Israel Potter and John Paul Jones. After receiving a large sum of money from another exploit, the two captains buy back and return the earl's possessions.

Ethan Allen, whom Israel Potter tries unsuccessfully to help escape from England.

Bibliography:

Dillingham, William B. *Melville's Later Novels*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986. Focuses on poverty and liberty in the novel. Sees Potter as a kind of Christ figure, a "sacrificial victim," with whom Melville identifies.

Hillway, Tyrus. *Herman Melville*. Rev. ed. Boston: Twayne, 1979. Briefly treats the work as an example of Melville's awareness of "man's ingratitude to man," of "tragic inconsistencies" "in human conduct," and of the "emptiness of worldly fame."

Karcher, Carolyn L. *Shadow over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville's America*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980. Calls the novel a reconstruction of the American Revolution as seen by what she calls "the forgotten common man." Demonstrates that the book shows Melville's sympathy for the oppressed.

Melville, Herman. *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile*. Edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle. The Writings of Herman Melville 8. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1982. In

Israel Potter: Israel Potter

addition to containing the authoritative text of the novel, this volume has the full text of Henry Trumbull's book, an excellent introduction, useful notes, and an excellent historical essay about the writing and publication of the book.

Samson, John. *White Lies: Melville's Narratives of Facts*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989. Treats Melville's novel as an ironic narrative of the American Revolution that "breaks narrative conventions" and "frustrates audience expectations."

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