Chapter - I

Introduction
The works of Herman Melville provide an illuminating study of an imaginative writer preoccupied with the dualities and ambiguities that are a part of the life of a human being. Melville's works gain greater coherence if examined from the point of view of the problem of Evil. This problem can be traced right from his earliest attempts at writing, to his last work in 1891. From his first piece of writing, *Fragments From A Writing Desk* (1839) Melville shows a preoccupation with the complex dualism which inheres in creation. The final anticlimax of the *Fragments* is his first attempt to portray the tragic reality that underlies dazzling appearance. The whole sequence of his works from *Typee* his first to *Billy Budd* his last, shows Melville examining the nineteenth-century American society which on the surface appeared organized and civilized but which at its roots was corrupt and grasping. For, despite the pretence of virtue that characterized its official moral codes, society in all its aspects was founded on hypocrisy, exploitation and fraud. It was Melville's experience also that in the civilized world Sin that paid its way could travel freely and without a passport, whereas, Virtue, if a pauper, was stopped at all frontiers. What was remarkable about such a society was that its proud commodores, senators and judges were the more guilty of inflicting
misery on their fellow-men.

In most of his works, more specially his earlier ones, Melville's heroes are young innocents who plunge into the world of experience only to learn that the world is full of evil hidden beneath a thin mask of innocence. And it is the way in which each of these heroes comes to grips with this world that gives Melville's works a single vision. His characters do not grow physically. They mature emotionally. Melville shows a special liking for the lonely, deserted, orphaned hero or the 'Ishmael' character who wanders round the earth in his search for the Ultimate. He has transformed the Biblical Ishmael to suit his own artistic and symbolic needs so that Ishmael of Moby-Dick is as much an 'Ishmael' as Ahab is or as Pierre is or as Jackson of Redburn or Mortmain of Clarel are.

When Melville returned home from his South Sea voyage, he saw American society in the process of a great transformation. On the economic front, he saw America dedicated to industrialization and mechanization. Though these were aimed at bringing the maximum benefit to mankind, they brought in their train conditions which today Americans have learnt to take for granted but which then were causing great misery to the people. And what was remarkable was that industrialism was treated as a value in itself; people encouraged it as the patrons
of the Renaissance encouraged art, not
doubting that the activity was a great
one, and made for a higher civilization.¹

What kind of a civilization his country was heading for,
Melville could very well imagine even when he wrote Typee
(1846). By the time he wrote The Confidence-Man (1857),
the last of his full-length novels, he was so disillusioned
with what was happening everywhere that the very foundation
of his faith in the goodness of mankind was shaken. The
characters of The Confidence-Man appear to be types or
representatives of the bustling, greedy, inventive American
Middle West but actually they are representatives of an
appalling human world, a splintered and a wolfish world,
wherein, as R.W.B. Lewis says,

the crafty and utterly self-regarding denizens
are intent chiefly on fleecing one another.²

On the political front too, Melville's countrymen were
facing crucial problems. On one side they were advocating
the highest principles of freedom and equality for them-
selves and for all mankind; on the other they were refusing
to share those very privileges with the Negroes and the Indians
of their own country. Added to that was their adoption of the

policy of expansion and colonization which brought untold misery not only to themselves but to those whom they were out to conquer and colonize.

Equally important changes were taking place in the sphere of religion. Traditional interpretations of religion were beginning to be seriously questioned. The liberal principles of Unitarianism were replacing the dogmas of Puritanism and Calvinism. The doctrines of "original sin" and "innate depravity" were being challenged and in their place were being substituted such ideas as the divinity and excellence of man. The Americans were caught in a surge of optimism. Man was no longer thought to be governed by the doctrine of "predestination" but by "free will". He was suddenly looked upon as a creature of limitless possibilities who with the help of his scientific inventions could challenge and conquer anything under the sun. While Melville was himself a champion of the freedom of an individual from the shackles of dogma and religious conventions, he knew what the dangers of the individual free will would be in the extreme. Matthiessen is right when he says that

Melville had envisaged the fate of just such a man in Ahab. He had also seen in Ahab the destruction that must overtake the Man-God, the self-appointed Messiah.3

Melville had himself confessed to Hawthorne, in a letter (June 29, 1851), his dislike for a man who was completely dedicated to his head and had isolated himself from the magnetic chain of humanity.

But Melville's was a reflective and philosophical mind and his love of speculative thought always led him away from the evils of his society to grapple with greater dilemmas. In his major works like Mardi, Moby-Dick, Pierre and Clarel, Melville asks some of these questions: What is the nature of Reality? Is it All Evil or All Good or Pure Indifference? Does the Universe have any meaning or is it ruled by mere chance? Is man a victim of predestination or is he free to guide the course of his life? Should the mystery of the Universe be faced in a mood of defiance and despair or with acceptance and resignation? He does not ask or answer these questions directly but dramatically and poetically, by translating them into symbolic forms. This symbolic character of Melville's works has been accepted by most of his major critics.

Melville represents those imaginative writers of America who were preoccupied with "the great power of blackness". As against optimists like Emerson, who saw the Universe as beneficent to mankind, Melville's imagination made him painfully aware that
though in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright.4

His greatest work Moby-Dick is an expression of the obverse side of transcendentalism. He was always fascinated with 'the blackness of darkness' and his discovery of it in the works of Shakespeare and Hawthorne gave him a shock of recognition and encouraged him to depict it in his major works viz. Mardi, Moby-Dick, Pierre, The Confidence-Man and Clarel.

Evil and everything connected with it viz. demonism, Hell, Satanism etc. have been the subjects of literature from times immemorial. What makes Melville's portrayal so unique is that he grapples with Evil in a totally modern, democratic setting and yet makes it an inexorable force, at once physical and metaphysical. His characters who face the power of evil do not have the trappings of royal heroes or religious saints as it so often happens in most fiction. They are ordinary folks chosen from the common ranks of mankind. And it is this aspect of Melville's works that appeals most to the modern reader.

His life on the sea had convinced Melville that "meditation and water are wedded forever". Hence in

4 Moby-Dick, (San Francisco: Rinehart Press,1957), Ch.42, p.192. All references to the text, hereafter, will be to this edition.
Moby-Dick he depicted his search for Truth against the background of the sea. The two most powerful symbols through which Melville probes the mystery of the Universe are the sea and the White Whale. Paying tribute to Bulkington in chapter 23 of Moby-Dick, Melville says that

\[\text{in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God - so, better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety}^5\]

His first six novels show his heroes adventuring at sea in quest of an ultimate knowledge and experience. It was Melville's belief that the sea inspires man to plunge into the deepest meditations but the land thwarts his efforts to front the essential facts of life by offering him safety, complacency, conventions and all that is kind to his mortality. Most of his lesser works also have the sea as a background with the action taking place on a ship or a whaler. Melville sees life on a ship as a microcosm of life on earth for he believes that the wickedness and depravity that characterize men on a vessel can be found on a larger scale on land. Allied to his conception of the sea as an abode of Truth, is his conception of the solitary wilderness. The wasteland or the desert, immense, desolate and terrifying is a fit place for the confrontation of Truth. One has to face

\(^5\text{Ibid., ch.23, p.105.}\)
loneliness and terror while traversing these areas. Melville's poem *Clarel* shows how various people confront Reality in the wilderness of the Holy Land. *Clarel* stands on a level with *Moby-Dick* in so far as it examines man's search for Truth. Like the immense Pacific, the 'Encantadas' or the 'Enchanted Isles' evoke feelings of awe and terror.

The White Whale symbolizes the inscrutability of the Universe which engenders either hostility, defiance and despair or reverence, awe and acceptance. But Melville was a pessimist by temperament and his wide and varied experience both on land and sea convinced him that the forces of the Universe were more hostile than beneficent to mankind. Hence as Lawrence Thompson, in his work *Melville's Quarrel with God* says, the negative side of Melville's thematic concern for the meaning of 'Truth' is far more arresting than the affirmative. And it was because of this aspect of his works that Melville became a writer in exile in a country and in an age guided by tremendous optimistic energy.

Two distinct approaches to Evil mark Melville's works. One is the earlier approach of defiance and timonism as typified by Taji (*Mardi*), Ahab (*Moby-Dick*) and Pierre (*Pierre*). All these three titans dichotomize good and evil as two distinct aspects of reality. They challenge evil with a view to destroying it but court disaster in return. Melville's later works i.e. those after *Pierre* show him
leaning more towards an attitude of 'acceptance' or 'resignation' to evil. The protagonists of his later works accept good and evil as two facets of the same reality. Melville thus moves from the single vision to the double - a vision that encompasses both the bright and the dark aspects of man's life. In fact, one finds signs of this 'double vision' in all his works. But the works after Pierre reflect a greater consciousness of it. Melville appears to be more concerned with projecting the contraries of life than their solution.

This study is an attempt to examine the various facets of evil reflected in the bulk of Melville's works. To most readers and students in India Moby-Dick is the only work of Melville's, worth reading or studying. Even works like Mardi, Pierre, The Confidence-Man and Clarel which contain some of Melville's major pronouncements on evil are neglected. This is chiefly because his works are loaded with allusions, references and equivocations which stand in the way of his most typical works becoming popular. An attempt has therefore been made to show how each of Melville's works is a fascinating study of an important aspect of evil. A chapter has been devoted to examining the various influences that were responsible for shaping Melville's concept of Evil. A comparative study of Melville and Hawthorne is undertaken with a view to examining the treatment and scope of the problem of Evil as reflected in their works. The chapter
entitled 'Philosophical Currents In Melville's Works' examines briefly, the various religious philosophies, Melville became acquainted with and how they helped him directly or indirectly to portray the Manichaean struggle between Good and Evil in Moby-Dick. The second part of this chapter is devoted to examining Melville's interest in Hinduism and its approach to Evil. An attempt has been made to examine how far Melville's approach to Evil is analogous to the Indian viewpoint. Taking all these factors into consideration, specially the depth and scope of the approach to the problem of Evil, Melville's place among American writers as also the writers of the world has been discussed.