INTRODUCTION

Of all forms of literature the epic is the most varied and exhaustive in scope. A simple definition of so varied a form would, therefore, not be valuable. Both Cecil M. Bowra, *From Virgil to Milton* (1948), and E.M.W. Tillyard, *The English Epic and Its Background* (1954) present detailed discussions of epic characteristics. An epic novel may be briefly defined as narration often revolving around a struggle or conflict of some sort which portrays and affirms the cultural values, beliefs, and way of life it embodies, simultaneously giving the reader a sense of what it was like to be alive at that time. The epic hero, is a man who, in some way, stands out from the multitude of men. He may be braver, stronger or have an extraordinary perceptiveness which enables him to be the most articulate spokesman for his time. Epic language should be the language of the people and time it reflects. *The Odyssey* might have enjoyed less success were it written in French or Spanish. The language of the

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epic must bear a direct relationship to its subject. The epic novel is also historical; it reflects a particular group of people living in a particular time. Through the use of archetypes, images and symbols a sense of universality can often be given to local places and events. For instance, the events of The Iliad are far removed from the present in time, yet every human being, by virtue of his humanity, can understand the feelings of love, hate, triumph, and defeat which motivate Homer's heroes, for they are still felt by men now.

The development of the epic form may be traced from Homer's Odyssey in which Odysseus' voyage symbolises human life. A pilgrimage or voyage was a popular medieval theme and thus "the Odyssey has supplied the classic shape for the formal epic." Virgil added a new spiritual dimension to the form. In the Aeneid there are various manifestations of divinities. The adventures of Aeneas bestow upon the epic a wide range and diversity as a whole culture is depicted. The impact of Homer and Virgil and the status that they invested the epic form with, lasted till the end of the eighteenth century. It was Ovid who widened the scope of the epic by narrating a series of loosely connected stories. Lucan helped by focussing...

4 Ibid., p.35.
5 Ibid., p.70.
the epic form on the literal historical event. He narrated the civil war between Pompey and Caesar in keeping with Virgilian compression, but deleted the divine characters and scenes in heaven. It was Statius who gave the epic form a psychological bent.

The medieval writers stressed primarily the religious aspect of the epic. Dante included theology in his material along with human passions and a whole depiction of the medieval world, thereby granting an amplitude so necessary for the epic writer. The Renaissance epic was primarily social and political. Shakespeare, Spenser and Sidney all represent their age. Sidney, in his Arcadia wrote with great zest about politics. Spenser had the power to evoke the feeling of what it was like to be alive in the age of his Faerie Queene. Milton was revolutionary in his use of blank verse and in domesticating his crisis. Milton did not model his epic on the lines of the Renaissance epic writers, but went back to The Odyssey to the form of the classic epic. In the eighteenth century Fielding's Tom Jones; a picaresque novel about the life and adventures of its hero, approached epic dimensions.

The epic, then, is ideally designed to appeal to a single people at a specific time in history, and yet also to be understood and appreciated by future generations through its portrayal of universal human feelings and situations. Because the epic is highly particularized in local detail, epics of different places and times will vary greatly in
their use of character and symbol, their language and their attitude toward time. The epics of America will be different from the epics of other nations as the history of America is unique. The compelling image of a New World, a chance to start over, created, in a sense, a mythic idea of America that inspired, and continues to inspire, a special type of national literature. In *The American Adam* (1955), R.W.B. Lewis has attempted to define some of the singular characteristics of the myth:

The American myth saw life and history as just beginning. It described the world as starting up again under fresh initiative, in a divinely granted second chance for the human race, after the first chance had been so disastrously fumbled in the darkening Old World. It introduced a new kind of hero, the heroic embodiment of a new set of ideal human attributes.... The new habits to be engendered on the new American scene were suggested by the image of a radically new personality, the hero of a new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources. It was not surprising, in a Bible-reading generation, that the new hero (in praise or disapproval) was most easily identified with Adam before the Fall. Adam was the first, the archetypal man. His moral position was prior to experience, and in his very newness he was fundamentally innocent. The world and history lay all before him. And he was the type of the creator, the poet par excellence,
creating language itself by naming the elements of the scene about him. All this and more were contained in the image of the American as Adam.\(^6\)

Lewis also sees American culture as identified by the continuing dialogue or debate over the ideas which pre-occupy it. Every belief provokes its antithesis, and the dialogue which emerges from this opposition defines the moral, intellectual and artistic views of American culture at a given time. The terms of the debate he defines as innocence, novelty, experience, sin, time, hope, evil, the present, memory, the past and tradition.\(^7\) The dialogue these ideas provoke provides material for the creative imagination, and the task of the creative artist is to transform the ideas and statements into experience.\(^8\) Lewis sees the American dialogue, at least between eighteen-twenty and eighteen-sixty, as composed largely of three voices. He adopts Emerson's two-party system to define two: the Party of Hope which believes that Americans possess a clear conscience, unsullied by the past; that America has no past, but only a present and a future. Then he talks of the Party of Memory which emphasizes that sinfulness was never so patent as now in America, and that Americans have inherited a fixed legacy of corruption. However, Lewis feels that this


\(^7\) Ibid., pp. 1-2.

\(^8\) Ibid., p. 3.
dual distinction fails to account for another part of the debate and suggests there is also a Party of Irony. This is characterized by a tragic optimism, a sense of the tragic collisions to which innocence is liable, and an awareness of heightened perception and humanity which suffering makes possible. Though Lewis confines his study to the nineteenth century, his terms are so broad and so perceptive as to be also applicable to twentieth century literature. From his general definitions a fairly complete, workable definition of American epic is possible.

The hero of the epic ideally is Adamic in some way; he stands out from the multitude by virtue of his unique individuality and self-reliance, his innocence and optimism, his creative ability, or all these characteristics together. The American democratic ideal prevents the epic hero from being noble in social terms, but he becomes a man amongst men through his own more completely developed inner resources. Often the epic hero will be the bard himself, as in Whitman's "Song of Myself". The American epic theme, like that of the traditional epic, may be based on a conflict or struggle of some sort, but it is less often military and more often internal and ideological, as Lewis outlines in his idea of the cultural debate. The American epic often arises from, or is about, the

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tension between opposing ideas or characters who represent those ideas. Whitman is content to accept all multiplicity and contradictions as part of the great, diverse panorama that is America, and, therefore, a part of himself. Later, Eliot, unable to contain it all, seeks a spiritual kind of resolution and salvation for the evils of the modern world and its people.

Very often the debate is developed and articulated through the archetypal theme of the quest. It is illustrated in Melville's *Moby Dick* where Ahab sets out in quest of the White Whale. It is not uncommon for the American epic hero to be in search of his identity, the meaning of his existence, or his role in the cosmic sense of things. The quest may be external and geographical, but is more often an internal one. The search of Clyde, the hero of *An American Tragedy* is superficially geographic, but on a deeper level his quest is a psychological one in which he comes to some sort of understanding of himself and his destiny.

The symbols through which the quest is manifested become increasingly psychological in twentieth century American literature. John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* abounds in symbols. Max Spielman in addition to his parodic role as the hero's mentor, "represents the humanitarian scientific community of the atomic age and the psychoanalytic community of Freudian psychiatry."\(^\text{10}\) The epic quest or its resolution,  

is an affirmation of the way of life from which it originates, although after Whitman the more modern epic poets like Williams, Pound, and Eliot tend to qualify drastically the buoyant kind of optimism expressed in "Song of Myself" in light of contemporary history. If the questing hero is the American Adam his quest often involves a kind of archetypal fall from innocence. As a prototype for the artist, the American Adam's fall metaphorically expresses the maturation of the artist's vision.

The language of the American epic is like that of any other epic, the language of the people and the time it portrays. Thus, Whitman uses slang to identify himself with the masses, and to indicate the kind of unrestrained exuberance of American speech. In later epics, language takes on a more important function. The state of the language, the sincerity of words is a direct measurement of the health of the culture. When characters begin to use language carelessly, falsely, when the word becomes abstracted from the thing it stands for, then honest communication is no longer possible. Emerson was, perhaps, the first native American writer to recognise this dichotomy. In "Nature" (1836) he says:

The corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language. When simplicity of character and the sovereignty of ideas is broken up by secondary desires,... the desire of riches, of pleasure, of power, and of praise,... and duplicity and falsehood take place of simplicity and truth, the power over nature as an interpreter of the will is in a degree lost; new imagery ceases to be made and old words are perverted to stand for things which are not; a paper currency
is employed when there is no bullion in the vaults. In due time the fraud is manifest and words lose all power to stimulate the understanding or the affections.\textsuperscript{11}

Emerson's statements seem prophetic in light of some twentieth century epics. America for Whitman still represents a palpable land, extending from sea to sea, in which man is given freedom to develop himself to his fullest potential, materially and spiritually. Later, for Pound among others, America, and civilization in general, becomes an old bitch gone in the teeth and a few hundred books, - things hardly worth fighting a war over. As the civilisation grows more complex, language becomes the only means by which man can be differentiated from the machine, the only tool which allows him creative expression, intellectual individuality, and the luxury of human communication. The American epic writer uses language, at its simplest level, to portray the diversity, excitement, and colour of his country; his use of contemporary speech patterns identifies him with the people he springs from. On a more complex level, language is used as a measure of the corruption of man and his society.

The American epic attitude toward time is implied in Lewis's three-party system. The Party of Hope represents an optimistic attitude toward time. The present and future

become most important. History is in the making, rather than being a shaping influence. The epic hero who represents the hopeful outlook refuses to look back with regret. Perhaps Whitman best exemplifies this attitude toward time and history in "Song of Myself." The Party of Memory, composed of nostalgia-mongers and prophets of doom, with its emphasis on sin and evil, actually has no place in epic literature. By nature, epic literature, even in a more modern context than "Song of Myself" can see something good in the past, can see back to a time when life was freer, and had more meaning. Pound looks back to Ulysses, Eliot to Shakespearean England; both can see a time when man was not mired in corruption and evil.

The Party of Irony best defines modern epic, especially the epic novels of the twentieth century. The ideas of a tragic optimism, an awareness of suffering, and the belief that the possibility for good exists in man encompass time past, present and future. The past becomes valuable to the epic hero because the vast storehouse of past history and the personal past, or memory, add richness to his creative task; they enable him to achieve a perspective on the present. To see the present time as a culmination of all past times and events is also to realize the interrelatedness of all human achievement. One man then becomes an archetypal representative of all men. It is through the recognition of both present and future time that the epic writer most fully develops the tragic optimism of humanity. The 'American Adam,' in his innocence, is also blessed with the faculty of imagination, the ability to dream. The present
time sees the creation of idealistic dreams which are continually thwarted or, at best, compromised, in the future. In Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* Clyde's hopes and dreams of attaining wealth and social status are crippled as he is destined to be overpowered by the rigid economic stratification of a materialistic American society. Man's ironic fate is to be constantly vulnerable to suffering and he is aware of his own human inability to alleviate it. The epic hero does not, however, allow himself to be defeated by life's essentially tragic character. His heroism lies in his very ability to keep on dreaming, to keep on creating, knowing even as he does so that time will destroy his best efforts. We see George in *Giles Goat-Boy* struggling to save the world, his numerous attempts in the belly of the computer are often abortive, but his effort continues unabated.

One of the purest example of a successful use of the particular components of American literary epic is Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" (1855). Whitman's epic of nineteenth century America has no less meaning today than it had then. The refusal to dwell on the past, on history as something to be longed for and repeated, effectually removes the epic to a level of universality, freeing it from the bonds of time and space. Whitman's use of theme, language and time makes "Song of Myself" a fine example of a successful American epic. Written for the people it portrays, it is within their understanding. It expresses pride in its own time, and hope and optimism for the future. Whitman's epic will be concerned with the soul, the self, and
identity, not merely in a personal, but in a universal sense, for as he says; "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." Whitman, American epic bard and American hero, is the singer and, at the same time, the common man he sings. He is an interpreter of, and a part of, the world around him. His search for identity, for his relationship to the universe, is carried on through three main symbols: the grass, the sea and the open road, or quest. The open road indicates a journey or quest of some sort, in keeping with the American epic idea. Sutton suggests that the quest is, among other things, the progress of a free nation toward the ideal of a democratic community and brotherhood. For the individual, the poet, and therefore all men, it is the journey of life.

The heroic qualities in the American epic hero are not his superhuman characteristics, but his selfhood which he shares with Everyman, and his unabashed delight and joy in being alive. He is electrically alert to all kinds of stimuli: sensory, intellectual, and philosophical. The themes of the poem are broad, yet also American. Its hero is all men, and also the American Adam, a new kind of individual, created


apart from the "pulling and hauling" which forms the rest of mankind, who chants praises of a land he loves.

The epic form was not restricted to poetry alone in America. We may trace it back to Cotton Mather's prose work *Magna Christi Americana* (1702) which is a reflection of ancient epics. He begins his epic with the conventional announcement of subject and invocation to the muse:

"I write the Wonders of CHRISTIAN RELIGION, flying from the Depravations of Europe, to the American Strand. And, assisted by the Holy Author of that Religion, I do, with all Conscience of Truth, required therein by Him, who is the Truth itself, Report the Wonderful Displays of His Infinite Power, Wisdom, Goodness, and Faithfulness, wherewith His Divine Providence hath Irradiated an Indian Wilderness."  

The work is epic in tone and the arrangement of material. In the eighteenth century the epic form was associated with history and biography. Moses Coit Tyler, in commenting on Mather's *Magna Christi Americana* writes, "history and fiction are so jumbled and shuffled together, that it is never possible to tell...just where the fiction ends and the history begins."  

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with romance was developed in England by Scott and worked upon by Cooper and Simms in America. It was Simms, who associated romance with the epic form, in his preface of *Yemassee:* "The modern Romance is the substitute which the people of the present day offer for the ancient epic."

Around the period when Whitman's epic poem was published, Cooper had published his *Leather Stocking Tales* wherein the epic quality could be obviously discerned. George Lukacs observes that "in the entire history of the novel " Cooper belongs to the category of Scott and Tolstoy for dealing with "the character of the old epos." Cooper, in his novels, wrote about American Culture and the American way of life, thereby fulfilling an important aspect of the epic form. The *Last of the Mohicans* possesses vitality, action and suspense as the hero leads his four civilized friends through an Indian-beset forest. The hero has been idealized by Cooper, presenting him as a paragon of virtue and so investing him with a mythic character. Cooper has dealt with two types of primitive conduct: the noble, stoic savages and the Christian man of nature, and has given them epic dimensions as part of the American myth. The theme of alienation is revealed in the conflict between the traditional values of society and the solitary individual. *Leather Stocking* is seen as a tragic figure whose way of life

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will have to be sacrificed to give way to advancing society.

Leather Stocking fulfills one of the twenty-two points put forth by Lord Raglan in *The Hero* in which he enumerates the stage pattern of the Wandering Hero myth. According to Raglan we are told nothing of the childhood of the classic epic hero and in keeping with this Leather Stocking's record of life commences only after he has attained adulthood.

In writing about certain images of American culture and proposing ways of understanding the American way of life by representing it through the adventures of Leather Stocking, Cooper's novel echoes Virgil's *Aeneid* in which through the adventures of Aeneas, Virgil is able to delineate a whole pattern of culture. The wanderings of Leather Stocking represent a simple and universal symbol of human life just as did the journeys of Odysseus in *The Odyssey* which has supplied the classic shape for the formal epic. Cooper banks upon the powers of myth to make his novels vivid and also a vehicle for conveying his ideas and values. *The Last of the Mohicans* shapes the myth and simultaneously celebrates the deep bond of friendship between Leather Stocking and Chingachgook and the death of the young Indian hero, Uncas.

Cooper dealt with a truly epic subject, but in his works may be discerned a tension between the epic form and historical romance resulting in alternating styles within a piece of work.

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Melville, too, was confronted with a similar conflict which is "not an awkward alternating of styles that he takes for his solution but the abrupt abandonment of one style in favour of another. Mardi begins as a novel and suddenly becomes an allegory; Moby Dick again begins as a novel of a boy's seagoing experiences and becomes in the words of D.H. Lawrence, an 'epic of the sea.' 19

Melville's Moby Dick has frequently been alluded to as an epic romance and a poetic epic. Every resource of literary aesthetics is channelized to underscore the central theme: the theme of alienation, the loneliness of the human heart. Moby Dick is essentially symbolic; the ocean takes the place of Cooper's forest in representing the primeval states of nature. The chief symbol, the White Whale in whose glistening white surface the readers have found reflected their own deepest fears and desires. Some have interpreted the White Whale as symbolic of the all pervading evil and yet others have seen him as God himself; all powerful and indestructible. The Whiteness is associated with agreeable things like the innocence of brides and benignity of age, yet there is something elusive about it which strikes panic into the soul.

The novel is expansive and includes a comprehensive history of the whaling industry in folklore and myth thereby raising it to epic scale. Melville presents the harpooneers as

Homeric heroes. The ship, the whale boats and all the intricate apparatus is described in loving detail as is Achilles's Shield in *The Iliad*. The language is "bold, nervous and lofty" in the author's words. The novel depicts the traditions and customs of the given culture representing a fragment of civilization. It deals with a typical hero of nineteenth century; Ahab who is both victim and hero. Ahab's end is tragic as the all pervading evil engulfs him. His heroism lies in his revolting against evil, but his "tragic flaw" lies in his revolting with hatred. The portrayal of Ahab corresponds to three aspects of Lord Raglan's enumeration of the stages of the hero's life: we are told nothing of Ahab's childhood, he is the captain and leader of the ship and reigns uneventfully for sometime during which period he prescribes the laws. The morbidity prevalent in Ahab's character leads to his ultimate destruction. The book is the tragic or Promethean epic in which the poet defies his Gods and gives humanity a voice that protests against fate.

Not only is *Moby Dick* endowed with various epic dimensions, it undoubtedly lies behind many of the twentieth century epic novels of America. Melville was able to associate native material with qualities of the heroic past. R.W.B. Lewis writes that Melville dwelt upon "the griefs and hardships of Odysseus and the generalizations about the evil lot of mankind" and that *The Iliad* "emerges as the sombre portrait of a world at war, of sorrowing men caught up in vast forces and moving without hope to the violent death which awaits them, under the
rule of implacable divinities." Numerous twentieth century American epic novels inherited "the general desolation of _Moby Dick_"s ending. Inspite of its New World origin the American epic novel does not ride on a Renaissance wave of ebullience and expansionism but rather in a storm of despondency, doubt and universal destruction." This despondency is apparent in Dreiser's _An American Tragedy_ which may be dealt with as the epic as tragic form.

In the works of Dreiser is perceived the struggle against puritancial values resulting in novels of the twentieth century that deal frankly with all aspects of life. In _An American Tragedy_ the author made his voice and experience represent that of society thereby bestowing upon the novel qualities of epic. Just as in the _Aeneid_ through the adventures of Aeneas Virgil is able to speak for his age; how strongly law and order were appreciated, similarly in _An American Tragedy_ through the experiences of Clyde, Dreiser is able to portray the rigid economic and social stratification present in American society. It is this stratification due to which Clyde is unable to fulfill his ambitions. The unrelenting forces present within him and in his environment lead to his ultimate degradation.

It was Virgil who gave the epic, psychological depth. _An American Tragedy_ is a deep psychological study of a murderer

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20 R.W.B. Lewis, pp. 188, 141.
21 Leonard Lutwack, p. 10.
and also deals with moral implications of good and evil. These characteristics of the novel echo Milton's epic *Paradise Lost* which is a great psychological narrative probing deep moral and spiritual questions.

*Don Quixote* deals with the adventures of an engagingly unheroic hero; in *Clyde*, Dreiser makes a hero out of a boy who kills a charming young girl and then says, "Gee!" There are various symbols dealt with in *An American Tragedy*: money and sex representing success and failure, the accident conveys rootlessness, immaturity and the bell boys seem to represent temptation and evil companions in Bunyan's sense. The tragedy is borne out of the incompatibility of the will of man and his inexorable destiny.

*Giles Goat-Boy* John Barth's masterpiece is also an example of a twentieth century American epic novel. The hero of the narrative fulfills all the requirements of the classic hero as revealed in the earlier epics, as well as those enumerated, by Lord Raglan in *The Hero*. George's mother is a royal virgin, his father, WESCAC is the ruler of the University. The circumstances of his conception are unusual, he has a vision that he will be driven out of the college campus and will meet with a mysterious death on the sacred Founder's Hill far off from the campus.

We may compare *Giles Goat-Boy* with the *Odyssey*: George is a hero struggling against the forces of darkness just as Odysseus struggles against the forces of evil. The novel is a work of art surpassing realism, a goatboy venturing from
the goat barn to the University campus to discover truth. His task is heroic as he aims to save the world from being consumed by the atomic bomb. The hero is modern to the extent that the problems faced by him are the result of the advancement of science. The tragedy lies in the hero's periodic imprisonments and his foresight that one day he will be driven out of the campus. The "tragic flaw" in his character is his insatiate quest for knowledge. The area of mystery that shrouds his parentage and the attempt to murder him is revealed only toward the later half of the novel. All this goes to show that Giles Goat-Boy comprises of various epic qualities. The novel abounds in symbols, and has allegories within allegories. Satire is mingled with the comic just as it is in Don Quixote. The style is elevated and is mythical and sacred, full of archaic sounding words and rhythmic sentences. It is a picaresque novel, like Tom Jones. In Giles Goat-Boy various nations and cultures come together. It recapitulates the history of human culture and may be aptly referred to as a "comic epic in prose".

In the following chapters, I propose to bring out the salient epic qualities in: The Last of the Mohicans by James Fenimore Cooper as epic of the virgin soil, Moby Dick by Herman Melville as epic saga of the sea, An American Tragedy by Theodore Dreiser as epic as tragic form and Giles Goat-Boy by John Barth as epic as parody. In the conclusion I plan to trace the development and innovations that have come about in the epic form, its heroes and scope from classical literature to modern times.