CHAPTER II

MOBY DICK : EPIC SAGA OF THE SEA

For the enterprising American of the first half of the nineteenth century there were two main paths to adventure and freedom: the Frontier and the Sea. Whereas Cooper wrote about the Western wilderness peopled by hunters, Melville chose the sea of whales and whalers as his theme. The picture of life raised by both to the level of fiction was, in a way, reflective of archaic societies. The Last of The Mohicans and Moby Dick are reminiscent of the age of warriors and wanderers, of heroic individuals and story-tellers and may therefore, be called archaic epics. Like the valour of Cooper, the revengeful quest in search of the White Whale is indicative of the return to Primitivism in the American Novel. Melville, by enriching his book with qualities of the heroic past, endowed it with the 'epic-spirit'.

While Cooper introduced the concepts of energy and physical combat to counter-balance the traditionalism in American literature, Melville brought in depth of vision. The story of Ahab's struggle with the whale ends in destruction. But then, eventually all men die and all things
are brought to ruins and what remains are their forms and symbols, their literature and science. What we may perceive in Ahab's defeat is "the only pledge of man's ultimate victory, and the only final preventive of emptiness, boredom and suicide."¹ Thus Moby Dick is prophetic of a quality of life of which Melville had a deep vision. According to Browne, Melville even envisioned "a League of Nations, an organization to bind together individual members... and he further emphasises the need for companionship and association."² When in the chapter, 'The Grand Armada', he gives an account of thousands of whales joining together "...as if numerous nations of them had sworn solemn league and covenant for mutual assistance and protection."³

Cooper did not see much evil in the glorious world. But Melville, like Hawthorne dealt with the darker side of man's destiny and the reality of evil in the world. Melville was greatly influenced by Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter and Mosses from an old Manse. In Hawthorne he discovered at last

³Herman Melville, Moby Dick, ed. Harold Beaver (Aylesbury, Great Britain: Hazell Watson and Viney Ltd., 1972), p. 490. All other quotations from this novel are from this edition and will be indicated by the initials MD and page number in parentheses.
another writer beside himself who was trying to get at the very heart of things and saluted in him "the American, the Puritan, the man who can look straight at 'the darkness and decay and inscrutable malevolence of the universe.'" Melville like Hawthorne gave a psychological slant to the American epic. But, although "... Melville studied Hawthorne's art and learned indispensable lessons from it... about the great Art of Telling the Truth, in point of craftsmanship he had more difficult problems to solve than Hawthorne had because of the greater size, complexity and public unfamiliarity of his raw material, and because of the radical disparity between the physical and metaphysical aspects of his theme."

Another point of departure from Hawthorne is that whereas Hawthorne nationalised his epic by drawing from the legends of New England, Melville used the sea board as a take off point for his national epic. Nantucket represented the America for which he spoke:

The Nantucketer, he alone resides and riots on the sea; he alone, in Bible language, goes down to it in ships; to and fro ploughing it as his own special plantation. There is his home; there lies his business, which a Noah's flood would not interrupt, though it overwhelmed all the millions in China. He lives

---


on the sea, as prairie cocks in the prairie; he hides among the waves, he climbs them as chamois hunters climb the Alps. For years he knows not the land; so that when he comes to it at last, it smells like another world, more strangely than the moon would to an Earthsman. With the landless gull, that at sunset folds her wings and is rocked to sleep between billows; so at nightfall, the Nantucketer, out of sight of land, furls his sails, and lays him to his rest, while under his very pillow rush herds of walruses and whales (MD, p. 159).

Cooper and Melville not only chose New World themes, settings and characters but were themselves in contact with the world of intellect and imagination. In the eighteen-forties Melville undertook a whaling cruise aboard the 'Acushnet.' This cruise was his school for providing thought not only for his earlier works Typee, Omoo and Mardi but also for his epic Moby Dick. Later he signed aboard the frigate the 'United States' which furnished him with material for his austere reckoning of man's fate. In his own words "a whale ship was my Yale College and my Harvard" (MD, p. 208). Nor did Melville ignore the legends of the American whaling industry. The sinking of the whale ship 'Essex' by a huge Sperm Whale was a probable source for the sinking of the 'Pequod' at the conclusion of Moby Dick. The successful run of the Rusell-Purringtion panorama 'A Whaling Voyage Round the World' in 1849 may have indicated to Melville that Americans were interested in the adventures of whales and traditions
of whaling. In fact Morison and McLanathan write the work "suggests something of the vigor, the danger and the loneliness of a way of life to which Herman Melville was inspired to give such epic expression three years later in Moby Dick."\(^6\)

The narrative of a voyage was the simplest structure in early colonial literature. The writings of Melville and others in the nineteenth century were based on the same structure. In fact the literature of travel became one of the largest classes of American books. With Moby Dick (1851) we come to the peak of the American novel in the nineteenth century. In one gigantic effort Melville is able to deliver so much to the reader - the story of the Whale, the intricacies of the whaling industry, the philosophy of life, of evil and the nature of man's existence on earth. Just as Walt Whitman responds to vastness in Leaves of Grass: 'I am large, I contain multitudes,'\(^7\) similarly Melville evidently is seen to respond to the epic dimension of the multitude in the words:

For the mere act of penning my thoughts of this Leviathan, they weary me, and make me faint with their outreaching comprehensiveness of sweep, as if to include the whole circle of the sciences, and all the generations of whales, and men, and mastodons, past,
present and to come, with all the revolving panoramas of empire on earth, and throughout the whole universe, not excluding its suburbs. Such, and so magnifying, is the virtue of a large and liberal theme! We expand to its bulk. To produce a mighty book, you must chose a might theme (MD, p. 567).

The first half of the nineteenth century was the period of the American Renaissance when Americans were beginning to speak their own minds. The ideals of Liberty and Equality pervaded American literature. Melville's own experiences of the exploitation of natives in the Pacific Islands had inflamed in him the ideals of justice. In a way Moby Dick falls in line with Whitman's hope for an "epic of Democracy." Through the narrator of the book Melville invokes the "great democratic God," and the "just spirit of Equality, which has spread one royal mantle of humanity over all my kind," to "Bear me out in it ....if to meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways, I shall ascribe high qualities" (MD, p. 212).

One of the most explicit chapters on democracy is "Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish" where Melville ridicules the laws about the ownership of whales: "A Fast-Fish belongs to the party fast to it," and "A Loose-Fish is fair game for anybody who can soonest catch it" (MD, p. 505). From a debate on this whaling code, Melville starts philosophising about the rights of the poor countries. He even
refers to American plans of taking over Mexico. Moby Dick was thus very much in line with the political thinking of the mid-nineteenth century, thus fulfilling an epic characteristic. From the rights of countries Melville goes on to the rights of man. For Melville democracy meant the right of all men to achieve heroism, an epic trait, "his mature considerations of democracy centred about the subject of heroism. It was his ardent wish that in democratic America, where the new continually corroded the old, where conventions of thought had not become frozen patterns, where no aristocracy of bastards' blood thwarted the rise of genuine merit a new race of giants would arise, counterparts of the great giants who had walked abroad in former times."8

The period of awakening in America was also reflected in persistent scientific curiosity. Moby Dick represents man's heroic attempt to fathom the unknown, even though it ends in tragedy, the tragedy of man's limited comprehension.

Apart from the scientific temper, American literature of eighteen-fifties also reflected the economic motive for the investigation of nature. Melville, in fact defended whaling as a business; the novel is a massive and epic defence of whaling. It was in the seventeenth century that the use of whale products was discovered. At that time man began

to take greater interest in whaling and its technologies. By the nineteenth century the United States of America had built a fleet of seven hundred vessels for whaling. The nineteenth century American whaling society provides the background for *Moby Dick*. Whaling represented American enterprise and a tradition which touched the country's vital needs. The American spirit of adventure combined with the American genius and practical wisdom put American fishery in a preeminent position, as whaling was expressive of what was best in American character. It projected the peculiarities of American national life. The country's man power was supplied from various countries as represented by "Pequod's" crew of black, white, red and dusky men from all ends of the earth. "In their company we sail over well-known whaling routes, past familiar capes and headlands, giving chase not to fabulous monsters but to Sperm Whales and Right Whales of the sort that men had taken by the thousands, and having glimpses as we do so of other creatures—sharks, squid, sword-fish, sea hawks."9 The narrative is based on a whaling voyage pursuing whales ostensibly for economic motives. The technical facts are reported correctly within the framework of nineteenth century America's level of expertise in keeping with the epic

tradition of representing a particular era. It may be said that no book of its age is more thoroughly American than Moby Dick. Melville in his essay on Hawthorne wrote “The great mistake seems to be, that even with those Americans who look forward to the coming of a great literary genius among us, they somehow fancy he will come in the costume of Queen Elizabeth’s day.... Whereas great geniuses are parts of the times;... and possess a correspondent coloring.” Thus we find that in keeping with the epic style mode, Moby Dick is full of references to the America of Melville’s times. For example, alluding to Ahab’s shagginess, Melville writes “He lived in the world, as the last of the Grisly Bears lived in settled Missouri (MD, p. 250). Melville remained”... faithful to his own crass, coarse, unideal, and yet grandiose material - the life of American whalers - and to make of its unpromising images his symbols, of its hardly malleable substance his myth.” According to Rosenberry “Part of the pervasive character of epic and romance in Moby Dick is supplied by the fullness of its social gamut, which Melville appropriately presents in a pair of chapters titled ‘Knights and Squires’ (chs 26,27), and in certain later chapters, such as the cluster 38 to 40.... The supporting characters

11 Newton Arvin, p. 152.
introduced in these sections," continues Rosenberry, form a cast which "together with the complexity of its activities, contributes to the exceptional range and density that mark Moby Dick." 12

The central theme of Moby Dick is that of alienation. The feeling of loneliness and contemplation of suicide are reflected in the very first paragraph "damp drizzly November in my soul" (MD, p. 93). A similar state of mind is projected by Odysseus just before his nekyia: my heart was broken, and I wept as I sat upon the bed, and my soul had no more care to live and see sunlight." 13 Dante's Divine Comedy begins:

"Midway upon the journey of our life
I found that I was in a dusky wood;
For the right path, whence I had strayed, was lost. Ah me! How hard a thing it is to tell. The wildness of that rough and savage place, The very thought of which brings back my fear! So bitter was it, death is little more so." 14

We may perceive similar examples in Goethe's Faust and Eliot's Wasteland. This similarity with epics of different centuries not only makes Moby Dick one of great epics but also underlies the fact that the theme of Moby Dick was one of universal application and appeal. "...Melville was intensely interested in... the problem of alienation, of disturbance in the relation between the individual and the community. To choose the name Ishmael for his narrator

12 Edward H. Rosenberry, p. 82.
was to designate this relation as a primary theme of the novel. The name and the Biblical story which it called up were often mentioned by American writers in the early nineteenth century. The figure of the outcast was fascinating to a society whose official code of values gave an especially high value to conformity - whether the outcast was felt to be elegantly misanthropic, like Childe Harold, or strong but crude and barbaric, like the frontiersman Ishmael Bush in Cooper's The Prairie.¹⁵ Alienation is experienced by all of us at one time or another and is not limited to a particular era, Melville was writing out of the universal and not constricting his novel to any racial or national boundaries. This universality is conveyed in Moby Dick by a complex pattern of imagery, symbolism, history and folklore that is typically American thus enhancing its 'epicness'. The theme of alienation has particular relevance for the American as all Americans are immigrants or descendants of immigrants. Thus the novel is representative of the American psyche, thereby bestowing upon it another epic characteristic.

Melville's greatness lies in his being able to successfully wed fact with fiction. In his remarks about

Moby Dick to Richard Henry Dana in a letter of May, 1850, he wrote "blubber is blubber you know; tho' you may get oil out of it, the poetry runs as hard as sap from a frozen maple tree; and to cook the thing up, one must needs throw a little fancy, which from the nature of the thing, must be ungainly as the gambols of the whales themselves."¹⁶

"Novelists of the nineteenth century had respect for fact and reality, but, none was able to blend reality so perfectly with imagination as Melville could. The symbols used by Melville are explicitly linked to reality. Melville often makes use of Biblical allusions. Scott writes, "Each nation... came to adopt to itself a cycle of heroes like those of the Iliad; a sort of common property to all minstrels who chose to make use of them, under the condition always that the general character ascribed to each individual hero was preserved with some degree of consistency."¹⁷ In keeping with this tradition Melville turned to the Bible which furnished heroes for American Protestantism and which he believed to have elements of fable mixed with truth. Like the Biblical Ishmael, who was a social and religious outcast, Ishmael.

¹⁶Herman Melville, pp. 398-399.

the narrator of Moby Dick therefore conveys the sense of being an outsider. He seeks relationships other than those bestowed upon him by society and conventions. Just as the Biblical Ishmael was driven out of the holy family, "Melville's Ishmael seeks employment among the Quakers of Nantucket whom the Puritans drove out of New England as they sought to preserve the purity of their sacred community."

Ahab's name is also taken from the Bible. Moby Dick therefore can be interpreted in Biblical terms. Ahab's struggle to overpower the White Whale may be taken as symbolic of Satan's struggle against the Almighty. Both Ahab and Satan revolt against the Law of Nature, against Fate and the all-powerful God. Joseph believes that "the theme of Moby Dick is stated in unmistakable Biblical terms in Father Mapple's sermon. That is when Jonah wilfully disobeys God's command and chooses his own course of action, even nature plots to enforce God's will. Thus, Jonah is forced to realise his folly. The notion that God will not permit man to question His ways is the basis of the theme of not only Father Mapple's sermon, but of the novel as a whole. Similarly, both Jonah's disobedience and Ahab's defiance show that man has to honour his obligations to God and to his fellow men." 19


The titanic struggle of Ahab to quench his thirst for revenge against the White Whale does not comprise the whole meaning of the novel. It is, however, the dramatic core of the narration. In this drama, Ahab is portrayed as the chief protagonist endowed with traits of grandeur which elevate him to the stature of a tragic epic hero.

Ahab is the captain of the 'Pequod.' By virtue of his office he is granted authority. When he makes his first appearance on the deck of the 'Pequod' we are struck by the strength of his will, inspite of his handicap. He is maimed, but despite that, he stands erect. He pits his will against fate and circumstance: "What I've dared, I've willed, and what I've willed, I'll do!" (MD, p. 266). Every fibre of his being is bent toward the one aim in his life: to inflict injury and kill the whale that so disfigured him. His voyage in search of the whale reminds us of journeys undertaken by traditional epic heroes. In his obsession with this quest he has curbed all other emotions. This may be illustrated by his refusal to assist the 'Rachel' in searching for the captain's lost son. His mania has possessed the humanity and all the nobility present in his character. Even though he has suppressed his feelings we may discern a vein of nobility and humaneness in his character. Peleq knew him well and said: "...striken, blasted, if he be, Ahab has his humanities!" (MD, p. 177). Ahab is the noble captain of the ship; his humane feelings are explicit in his
relationship with Pip. He is protective about this young boy who has lost his sanity.

Peleq referred to Ahab as "God like". There are heroic qualities in Ahab which equate him with great epic heroes of literature. Mayoux says "In my opinion Ahab is descended from Oedipus, .... He has a furious capacity for interrogation.........................He is Oedipus as he interrogates the enormous severed head of the whale. He is Hamlet: "Speak... tell us the secret thing that is in thee.... That head... has moved amid his world's foundations."20 Ahab's search for the White Whale makes him lose contact with reality. He is mad, but his madness is like the madness of epic figures Don Quixote and King Lear. These figures are considered mad because they possess greater perception than most people. They are fully aware of the misery underlying human life. Ahab's madness is an essential trait in his greatness which makes it tragic. Men who have developed this tragic greatness are 'God like'.

Ahab's greatness is hampered by a 'tragic flaw' in his nature, that is, excessive pride. He says, "I'd strike the sun if it insulted me" (MD, p. 262). According to Arvin "the raging egoism Ahab embodies has something in

20 Jean Jacques Mayoux, pp. 86-87.
common with the Hubris of Greek tragedy, as it has also something, and still more, in common with the Christian sin of pride; but it is neither quite the one nor quite the other there is something of Prometheus, of Agamemnon, of Oedipus in Ahab: he is guilty of an inflated arrogance similar to theirs, a similar conviction of his superiority to the mass of ordinary men." Ahab's pride is not the result of conceit but due to a tragic understanding of life. This pride leads to his being isolated from the rest of his crew. He is exalted above all common people. Not only is he singled out on the basis of his superior insight but also stamped with a physical scar that runs from head to foot. This characteristic is present in Satan and Ahasverusm of great epics Paradise Lost and Queen Mab respectively. Melville describes the scar in the manner of an epic poem. "It resembled that perpendicular seam sometimes made in the straight, lofty trunk of a great tree, when the upper lightning tearingly darts down it, and without wrenching a single twig, peels and grooves out the bark from top to bottom, ere running off into the soil, leaving the tree still greenly alive, but branded" (MD, p. 219).

Like Satan and Prometheus Ahab rebels against the authority of God. Ahab's defiance has often been

21 Newton Arvin, p.179.
contrasted to the humble acceptance of Job. Like Job, Ahab believes that God is responsible for all suffering. Whereas Ahab defies, Job accepts submissively the ways of God. Ahab does not accept the order of the universe and reacts with cosmic defiance. Ahab's cosmic defiance is in keeping with the characteristics of American epic heroes, who play an active role in the cosmic sense of things. The quest of the American epic hero may be geographical, but more often it is an internal one in which the hero comes to some sort of understanding with his destiny. Similar is the case of Ahab whose quest is internal: the inner conflicts of his struggle of his humaneness to free itself from the clutches of his obsessive hatred and evil. The conflict of Ahab is symbolic of an individual's search for identity which is opposed to society and nature. In the words of Howard Horsford "The tragic power of Ahab is the power of America's deepest cultural commitment, to the figure of the isolated, self-reliant individual, defining himself against both society and nature."²²

Even though the epic hero is exclusive in his greatness, he nevertheless is a representative figure. In Raintree County the epic hero is the human manifestation of the life

of all men in the course of American history, just as Ahab is representative of all men who are tragically great. Ahab's tragedy elicits from the reader a certain amount of identification with his grief. His grief is like Milton's Satan who addresses the sun thus "To thee I call,/But with no friendly voice, and add thy name/ O Sun, to tell thee how I hate thy beams." Ahab stares at the sun and says: "This lovely light, it lights not me; all loveliness is anguish to me, since I can ne'er enjoy" (MD, p. 266). Ahab's quest is not the expression of an individual's personal revenge, but represents mankind's rebellion against injustices inflicted by hostile elements. "As with Carlyle's 'Heroes' and Emerson's 'Representative Men;' Ahab's personal experience is presented as a point of focus in which concerns of general human significance become sharply visible. His life illuminates the life of Man under the character of the Damned Soul. His injury becomes a figure for all the unmerited injuries of men; his fuming exasperation, with its intellectual and spiritual depth, summarizes all the 'rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down.'"

---


24 Herbert Walter Jr., p. 154.
Even before we are introduced to Ahab personally in the novel we become aware of his potentialities through association of his name with Ahab, King of Israel, who meets his doom because he has ignored the voice of prophecy. King Ahab was destroyed in a military mission which was unrelated to his damnation. Ahab by contrast seeks the very power that is the cause of his destruction. He is like the Old Testament ruler who did more to provoke the wrath of God than all the kings who had preceded him. Ahab is associated with various myths and symbols. There is mythical connection between Ahab and Christ. This may seem surprising at first, but, if the White Whale symbolizes the evil, then Ahab who is fighting the White Whale may be equated with good; with Christ. Ahab has a mythical association with the sun as well. He is identified with the new born sun of winter as the 'Pequod' sets sail on Christmas day. As the ship proceeds southwards, Ahab makes his appearance more frequent in correspondence to the increasing appearance of the sun. Ahab is at once a local and national character on the historical plane of narrative, a universal and representative man on the symbolic plan and a cosmic figure on the level of myth.

In keeping with the ambition of his intent Melville relies far more heavily on the use of symbol and imagery

---

25 Jean Jacques Mayoux, pp. 81-82.
than most epic writers. "The persistent tendency in Moby Dick is for facts, events, and images to become symbols."

"From the richly emblematic theme of 'meditation and water' in the opening chapter, to the final bursting of the 'black bubble' of the sea which releases young Ishmael, the narrator sets the symbolic as the primary mode of self-examination and communication." Most symbols which Ishmael develops in his narration express a complex of meanings.... Their meanings are not single but multiple;.... The symbolism in Moby Dick is not static. The major symbol in the novel: the White Whale is many levelled and complex. It is shown in its blinding palpableness to the reader emphasizing its mysterious character. Melville was dealing in his epic novel with the mystery of life: its enigma, the mystery of creation and the evil prevalent in the world. Moby Dick is the embodiment of that evil, of the destructive power of evil, of meaningless force, of terror, of death. For Ahab, the White Whale is all evil and nothing else. But Melville did not intend for Moby Dick to have so limited a meaning.

---


27Ibid., p. 46.

28Ibid., p. 47.
It has unlimited capacity to harm, but the evil is just a reflection of man's own evil.

The White Whale is also symbolic of the all pervading fate; "the whale, which from side to side was strangely vibrating his predestinating head" (MD, p. 683). The White Whale is referred to as "not only ubiquitous, but immortal" (MD, p. 281). In Mason's words "It was appropriate enough that, concerned with the vastest problems to which human imagination can extend itself-man's fate, and his power to resist or fulfil it - he should have chosen the symbol of the vastest living creature known to man."^29

The life of man is helplessly overshadowed by suffering which is pre-ordained. There is some unknown power responsible for all the misery in the world. This unknown power: Fate, is represented by the White Whale, "by keeping the idea of Fate constantly in the mind of the reader, the true correspondence of the White Whale is hidden by its blinding palpableness, and so each reader overlooks it, and invents his own symbolical meaning for Moby Dick."^30

---


relationship between Fate and the world was projected by the bones of the whale. Her "bulwarks were garnished like one continuous jaw, with the long sharp teeth of the sperm whale... tiller was in one mass, curiously carved from the long narrow lower jaw of her hereditary foe" (MD, p.165).

Ahab described the White Whale to be a transcendental reality behind the appearance of things. "All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event-in the living act, the undoubted deed-there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me."(MD,p.262).

Moby Dick is associated with various god-images: It is called 'Job's whale,' 'Shaker God incarnate,' 'Grand God'. In fact "Melville creates a whale-world and imprisons us in it. The whale is first zoological, then cosmological, then becomes the leviathan, the indomitable manifestation of God's power and will-while continuing to remain a tangible living being." By doing so Melville created a great visionary epic.

An important aspect of Moby Dick which renders it with enhanced beauty as well as shrouds it with a strange

---

31 Jean Jacques Mayoux, p. 72.
foreign aura is its whiteness. The whiteness reminds us of Poe's 'The Narrative of a Gordon's Pym' and its flights of gigantic white birds. Although Melville relates whiteness to many sacred and attractive things they are mentioned only to be discarded as he ultimately associates it with evil:

Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows - a colorless all-color of atheism from which we shrink? And when we consider that other theory of the natural philosophers, that all earthly hues - every stately or lovely emblazoning - the sweet tinges of sunset skies and woods; yea, and the gilded velvets of butterflies, and the butterfly cheeks of young girls; all these are but subtile deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without; so that all defied Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within; and when we proceed further, and consider that the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of her hues, the great principle of light, for ever remains white or colorless in itself, and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects, even tulips and roses, with its own black tinge - pondering all this, the palsied universe lies before us
a leper; and like wilful travellers in Lapland, who refuse to wear colored and coloring glasses upon their eyes, so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him. And of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt? (MD, pp. 295-296).

"This basic dichotomy of a dark, terrifying underside beneath the deceptive surface of beauty and mildness appears again and again in Moby Dick.... It is part and parcel of the basic imagistic and symbolic pattern of the novel," in keeping with Melville's belief that "the mind which possesses greatness and genius not only perceives the delightful beautiful surfaces of life but also grapples with the terrors of existence which lie beneath; a recognition of life's beauty and joy must be accompanied by an awareness of what he calls the 'power of blackness.'"

We come across innumerable symbols in Moby Dick. The 'Pequod' symbolizes the world. This symbolic ship is manned by various personifications of virtues and vices. For example Tashtego represents Sin, Dagoo Ignorance, Bildad Hypocrisy, Peleg Honesty and Queequeg Religion. Queequeg represents Melville's sincere regard for natural religion.

---


33 Ibid., p. 333.
as distinguished from Christianity. Ishmael in his search for spiritual rest found solace only in the bed of Queequeg. In relationships like that of Ishmael and Queequeg, Melville is able to "single out certain experiences within the larger field of social relationships which can be affirmed and from which durable values can be derived." 

The above personifications bestow upon the novel the epic characteristic of universality. Even though the specific events may belong to a particular century, the feelings of love, hate, attitudes towards hypocrisy, sin and religion are relevant to all times. For example, the events of *Iliad* are far removed from the present time, yet every human being by virtue of his humanity, can understand the emotions of love and hate, triumph and defeat which motivate Homer's heroes, for they are still felt by men. Although Melville's symbols are new in a sense, what they symbolize is as old as man.

Water is associated with meditation. When Melville refers to thousands of men meditating in reveries upon sea he means to represent the universal interest felt by humanity about life and destiny. Melville states that the sea holds attraction for men debating on deep philosophical questions. Ishmael in his spiritual quest turns to the sea.

---

34 Henry Nash Smith, p. 73.
This is reminiscent of *Pilgrim's Progress* which begins with a confession and describes the experience of a rational man who dejected by the futility of life searches for spiritual comfort.

The most dominant image in the novel is that of the difference between land and the sea. The land offers comfort and security, the sea represents hardships and death. Whereas the land offers happiness, it is a false happiness. The isolation and suffering at sea is reality. To Bernstein it seems "that Melville clearly feels that the darker world - the ocean - is the dominant reality" and further quotes from Moby Dick "The sun hides not the ocean, which is the dark side of this earth and which is two-thirds of this earth. So, therefore, that mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, that man cannot be true - not true, or undeveloped."³⁵

Thus we see that many of the epic themes of the novel are conveyed through the various symbols and images. It is able to gain a dimension of epic complexity by the differing symbolic representations. Its universal epic appeal is also due to its intense psychological symbolism.

On the cosmic level as well, the White Whale symbolizes

the chaos prevalent in the universe. It stands for the cosmic will to rebel against an order which is so resolute and powerful makes the conflict deeply moving. 

In order to perceive the epic quality in Moby Dick it is essential to develop awareness of the whale in history, folklore and mythology. It is through a study of the whale's anatomy and the whaling industry that the mystery and awe associated with the whale are conveyed. Moby Dick is an encyclopaedia on whaling. There is hardly a detail of a whaleship's equipment and hardly a word in whalemen's vocabulary which Melville does not describe. Moby Dick is an account of the fabulous industry of whaling as it existed in nineteenth century America. Not only do the chapters related to the whaling industry form an informative background, but they are woven intricately into the mainstream of the novel. Even when Melville is describing the details of the Whale's anatomy the dramatic tension continues unabated through the memory of the reader. If the information were presented simply as objective enumeration of facts it would have been objectionable. But Melville "could describe the appearance, the concrete matter-of-factness, and the utility of each one of these natural objects, implements, and tools with the fidelity of a scientist, and, while doing this, explore it as a conceivable repository of some
aspect of the human drama. The narration of episodes related to whaling often set Melville off on a flight of imagination that is not even remotely associated to the hunt. Thereby, Melville is able to delve deep in philosophies.

The pursuit of whales besides being informative is entertaining as well. The most entertaining episode being that of Stubb's supper after killing the Sperm Whale. After this we are introduced into the long process of extracting oil from whales. We are told in detail of the process of converting blubber into oil. A veritable factory is set to operate. The head of the whale contains the most precious kind of sperm oil which is lifted out with buckets. The whole process is repeated when the next whale is spotted by the cry of "There she blows" (MD, p. 539). "The cumulative effect of this bulk of material on the whale -its anatomy, its antiquity its divinity and more - is to storm the imagination by sheer mass and magnitude" thus giving the book an epic scope.

It is during a chase after a whale that Pip jumps from the boat into the sea and being lost for sometime.

---


loses his sanity. In his 'divine madness' Pip becomes the medium through whom Melville is able to convey much wisdom. It is while participating in the various activities of whaling that Ishmael indulges in much philosophising. The chapter which deals with the thick blanket of blubber concludes with the author's thought provoking statement: "It does seem to me, that herein we see the rare virtue of a strong individual vitality, and the rare virtue of thick walls, and the rare virtue of interior spaciousness. Oh, man! admire and model thyself after the whale! Do thou, too, remain warm among ice. Do thou, too, live in this world without being of it. Be cool at the equator; keep thy blood fluid at the Pole" (MD, p. 414). It is through stray incidents that we realize that the whaling scenes, though seemingly extraneous to the central action, form a complex background pattern for the main theme. They form a background of realistic daily life, and by the sheer volume of material on whales and whaling the ubiquity and immortality of Moby Dick is presented to us vividly.

Lewis says that the chapters on the whale are "an excellent example of Melville's way assimilating and evaluating knowledge so that what was extraneous becomes intrinsic, and what was a fact in the history of the whale becomes an element in the myth that he is weaving." 38

Since time immemorial epics had compiled material relating to aspects of individual mythologies. But Melville was amongst the first to assemble many of world's mythologies in one epic. Before starting his novel he familiarises us with the new aspects of the novel which he is the innovator of. The sub-librarian which he refers to is our sub conscious mind and the huge imaginative world that he creates represents the evil within us, evoking our sense of identification. Having such vast material at hand, Melville was able by various mythical allusions to create a massive world of imagination. The rich texture of the novel results not only from psychological symbols and the moral meanings they convey, but, also from the epic quality of mythical allusions. A general meaning of myth includes events of history allegorised by the mind. Myth includes History and Psychology. It was Melville's endeavour in Moby Dick to create his own myth. Moby Dick is "an imagined narrative in which the leading roles are played by divine or god-like personages, engaged in symbolic actions amid symbolic objects; which embodies some form of the conflict between human wishes and nonhuman forces, and which has its roots in a philosophically serious desire to comprehend the meaning of nature and the destiny of man. The literary expression toward which myth in this sense typically moves is the epic."

---

39 Newton Arvin, p. 183.
Melville uses the whaler's imagination to project his mythical world and through his wild imagination is able to transcend the physical world:

For not only do fabulous rumors naturally grow out of the very body of all surprising terrible events....; but, in maritime life, far more than in that of terra firma, wild rumors abound.... And as the sea surpasses the land in this matter, so the whale fishery surpasses every other sort of maritime life,... of all sailors, they (whalemen) are by all odds the most directly brought into contact with whatever is appallingly astonishing in the sea,..., the whaleman is wrapped by influences all tending to make his fancy pregnant with many a mighty birth.

No wonder, then,... the outblown rumors of the White Whale did in the end incorporate with themselves all manners of morbid hints, and half-formed foetal suggestions of supernatural agencies, which eventually invested Moby Dick with new terrors unborrowed from anything that visibly appears. (MD, p. 278).

One critic has written that _Moby Dick_ "is one of the first great mythologies to be created in the modern world, created, that is, out of the stuff of that world, its science, its exploration, its terrestrial daring, its concentration upon power and dominion over nature, and not out of ancient symbols, Prometheus Endymion, Orestes or mediaeval folk-legends like Dr. Faustus."^40

^40 Lewis Mumford, p. 131.
The characters in the novel seem to be quite ordinary in the beginning but as the novel proceeds they take on the attributes of poetic figures of different cultural legends. They are tossed about by various forces and their destinies seem preordained as if they were Gods or heroes. The leading roles are played by divine-like persons whose actions have symbolic connotations which embody conflicts between man and forces of nature. Ahab is like "a shaggy, a battered and misanthropic Prometheus out of Nantucket. He is like Faustus, whose soul rebelled at the bondage of its own self commitment to the denying spirit of Mephistopheles. He is like Orestes, caught in the conflict between the dark vindictive Bumenides of an older creation and the bright Olympian deities, Athena and Apollo."

Nowhere is Melville's myth making power more at work than in the creation of the huge, fearsome and godly White Whale. It is by associating Moby Dick with mythical gods that his grandeur is enhanced, making Moby Dick a mythic presentation of what is godlike in the universe— a god that embodies physical vastness. This epic projection could have been made only by a poetic mind of the American nineteenth century as it was then that supernatural force and ceaseless physical change was an obsession.

---

Moby Dick is identified with the Vishnu myth of the Hindu religion. There are many other fish myths and dragon myths associated with the White Whale—Beowulf's battle with Grendel, Chinese dragon myths, Rustam's fight with the White Demon and the Babylonian Bet Merodach's struggles with the dragon Taimat—all reflecting myths of various cultures, in true epic tradition. But the mythic dragon which is frequently referred to is the Leviathan. The Leviathan is reminiscent of monster whales and could even stand for Satan. Whereas Melville, had referred to Moby Dick as Vishnu, he preferred to use the Egyptian mythic struggle between Osiris and Typhon as a framework to explain the struggle between Ahab and Moby Dick. In the Hindu myth, the fish (Vishnu) denotes the preserving power, whereas Moby Dick was to symbolise destruction; therefore Melville's preference for the Egyptian myth. Osiris like Ahab wanders on the ocean in his search for Typhon, a sea monster. Typhon too dismembers Osiris. Typhon like Moby Dick is symbolic of all that was malignant to man. Typhon and Moby Dick have another mythological similarity. Just as Moby Dick symbolized all that is harmful in nature, so did Typhon. They were both also representative of the ocean itself. There are still other common factors between the story of Osiris and Ahab. The suggestive impotence of Ahab is like that of Osiris. Every time Ahab descends to remain below deck for a while, we
remember the disappearance of Osiris from the world after every dismemberment. In spite of the many similarities Ahab is in a way tragically different. He is a mortal, whereas Osiris was immortal.

Most Western mythology underlined the fact that Egypt was the birthplace of the gods. This was one of the reasons Melville often referred to Egypt in his novel as in "pyramidal silence. And this reminds me that had the great Sperm Whale been known to the young Orient World, he would have been deified by their child-magian thoughts. They deified the crocodile of the Nile, because the crocodile is tongueless; and the Sperm Whale has no tongue, or at least it is so exceedingly small, as to be incapable of protrusion* (MD, p. 454).

Melville's use of myth goes on to equate Ahab with various gods. Ahab's relation to the Sun-God becomes explicit as each of the three injuries of Ahab are associated with the position of the sun (between autumn and winter). Every ascent of Ahab after his catastrophe is like the Osiris myth, connected to the setting and rising of the sun. Osiris was considered to be a Sun-God by the Egyptians. Ahab is called "the hot old man" with a "fiery hot" body who is sailing in his "fiery hunt" and thereby identified with the sun. Ahab is further identified with the Fertility God as shown through the phallic rituals conducted on the 'Pequod'. In the course of the narration Ahab is compared to Prometheus, Noah, Zoraster
and Perseus, four other mythological saviours. Browne thinks that the book is a "serious dramatization of the conflict between Prometheus and Zeus, or hero against god. Ahab is the 'false Prometheus', a perverter of real Promethean impulses. Ahab dares question the supremacy of God over man, the inviolability of his laws and the reason for their supremacy."  

Melville was indebted to American folklore. In folklore whales are widely considered as demons of storms who can not only produce storms but even lightning. It was a common belief among American whalemen that whales were the cause of storms, and this belief seems to be the basis of the scenes in Moby Dick where the 'Pequod' has to experience terrible storms prior to encountering a whale. Melville was also acquainted with the study of witchcraft and drew from it his conception of the whaling world which is ruled by a Devilish supernatural power who in the form of an animal deceives and ultimately destroys the hero. Trimp has written that "... the supernatural aspect of the story of Moby Dick - Ahab's mistaken belief that he could outwit and destroy the Devil himself by destroying the whale - the historical accounts of witchcraft, witch trials, and the mistaken persecution of witches, existed in the histories of New England, especially of Salem, and in the very popular reprintings of the Puritan's own books. There were, besides,
tales purporting to be true of whaling captains in the nineteenth century who had consulted occult powers with tragic results. Some of Ahab's natural adventures as whaling captain and his main supernatural adventure were already part of the American historical tradition." Mythology had played an important role in literature ever since the Romantic period. But Melville was the first modern symbolist to use myth to such an extent in his gigantic epic. He used myth to convey his epic theme of the relation of human life to the forces of the universe. It was through his adoption of mythology that he created a particular aura around his epic hero. Mythology was, in fact, Melville's instrument to construct not only his epic theme and epic hero but also to give enhanced richness to the epic framework and texture of the novel.

Although the narrative mode used by Melville in *Moby Dick* is mainly prose, we often feel the poetic rhythm in his sentence construction. Many of Ahab's soliloquies are in blank verse which is characteristic of Shakespeare. The whole chapter 'Nantucket' is a prose-poem which is written in a barbarous jocular style. The rhythmic pattern prevalent in *Moby Dick* gives it its poetic aura. It is the rhythm of the sentences, their periodicity which gives us a feel of the waves of the sea -- so vital for Melville's epic considering his subject matter was based on life at sea. This

---

43 Helen P. Trimpi, pp. 126-127.
has led Lewis Mumford to call Moby Dick a Poetic Epic.

The pattern of rhythms in Moby Dick used constantly help in developing the theme and symbols of the novel. An example of this are the meditations of Ishmael when he wakes up after spending the night on the same bed as the pagan harpooner. He refers to Queequeg as "this head-peddling harpooner" and then the theme of brotherhood is made apparent when Ishmael wakes to find himself in the 'bridegroom clasp' of Queequeg "as though naught but death should part us twain" (MD, p. 120). Bender thinks that there is no question that Moby Dick contains some of America's most impressive poetry. "Among the countless critical efforts to 'know' Moby Dick, those that have lanced closest to the innermost life of the fish have praised its deep poetic nature. These tributes range from Alfred Kazin's description of the novel's 'poetic power' and Richard Chase's praise of 'Melville the unsurpassable poet' to F.O. Matthiessen's more technical analysis of the Shakespearean influence on Moby Dick's language." 44

E.M. Forster in his Aspects of the Novel has granted Moby Dick a special place as prophetic fiction. The theme of such a novel, he says, is the universe and its expression is more poetic than narrative. Melville was able to combine

the world of common sense with poetry. In order to do so he wrote a book which was vast and comprehensive in scope. It included science, factual knowledge which was combined with philosophy to result in poetic song. Supernatural elements and riddles on life and death give the novel aspects of a romance. But it transcends the narrative of romance to take on the qualities of an epic. Melville's subject matter could be aptly equated to the vastness of his Whale. The Whale being a huge mass of elusive whiteness offered layers within layers. On its dissection we realize that there is much more to the whale than can be perceived at a glance. The deeper we penetrate, the more we discover, the more we get appalled by its vastness and depth. Such is the universe in which man lives. It is unfathomable.

Another aspect of style used by Melville for aggrandisement is the formal simile. The similes are reminiscent of Homer and Virgil. An example of these 'epic' similes is the passage in the chapter 'The Grand Armada' which compares the large number of Sperm Whales speeding through the straits of Sunda to an army marching fast through difficult mountainous region, "all eagerness to place that perilous passage in their rear" (MD, p. 491). The metaphors in the novel are also used to aggrandize or subdue. On the one hand we are told about royalties, Czars and Sultans, of eminent institutions 'the ruins of Lima,' 'the great dome of St. Peter's' and on the other hand Ahab
condescendingly talks of gods as mere cricket players. Although Melville drew his material from Cheever's The Whale and his Captor, what are "Cheever's facts are Melville's metaphors. If Cheever baldly remarks that the fin on the back of a finback whale resembles the gnomon on a sundial, Melville, appropriating the image, endows it at once with metaphorical richness by associating it with a reminiscence from Isaiah: 'On that Ahaz-dial the shadow often goes back.'

Closely related to the metaphors are the images that are taken from nineteenth century industry of America. The images of drilling, of mining, of cogged wheels and of mechanical looms. There is constant imagery relating to animal life. Ahab is likened to many animals such as tiger, grizzly bear, wolf, sea-lion and walrus. Even the harpooners are compared to tigers. This analogy is the means by which Melville conveys the bestiality of men. The epic similies, the metaphors and the imagery all go to add to the majestic style so apt a vehicle for communication for an epic.

Melville's narrative uses rhetoric to allow an interplay of pressure and control in the structure of the novel. Ishmael when giving vent to his emotional sensibilities is kept within certain limitations by rhetoric. There is great versatility in his language and the variations allow a

45Newton Arvin, p. 148.
certain pattern of sound and sense. The rhetoric mostly used by Melville is of poetic style as in the soliloquies of Ahab. It is by the heavy reliance on rhetoric that Ahab is projected as a commanding epic personality. Ahab's grand style of speech transcends his corrupt life and callousness and grants him an undeserved heroic stature. His theatrical recitations so attract us that we tend to overlook the destructive tendencies of the obsessed captain and sympathise with his lonely solitude. Ahab is able to project a poise which is quite different to his real self and like Cervantes' immortal fool he follows his set path with no time for jest. The rhetoric of Moby Dick is a surface beneath which intricate symbols are at work which keep the rhetoric from becoming monotonous. The diction is manipulated to reveal the psychological needs and deprivations suffered by the characters.

The style appropriate to convey such psychology should be meaningful and consistent. Melville's metaphysical style allows frequent shifts from the scene of events to philosophizings. This is the way he unfolds before the reader Ishmael's transformation from despair to a deeper perception and understanding. The continual plotting of his development forms a framework which binds all the major themes of the novel giving it an epic unity. Melville borrowed quotations from the works of Rabelais, Bunyan, Milton, Goethe, Lamb and Cooper. He quoted from the Bible, from Darwin and Plutarch in his endeavour to prove that one may treat a common subject
in a noble style which is the characteristic of every epic. The influence of other epic writers is obvious in some ways. In Dante's *Divine Comedy* the focus is on the will of God. Similarly in *Moby Dick* the focus is on the will of the Whale and the characters are classified in their relation to the Whale. In the *Divine Comedy* each event adds to the comprehension of the character who gains from the next event and thus a transformation is a result of the whole. Ishmael in *Moby Dick* follows the same pattern of gaining from each event to be transformed by his ultimately achieving a deep insight. Shakespeare's influence is apparent in Ahab's conflict within his self and also with the forces around him. The interventions of Ishmael become a means of conveying truth throughout *Moby Dick* and these are reminiscent of the visions of medieval literature of which Dante's *Divine Comedy* was a masterpiece.

Melville's distinction lay in the fact that despite making use of transcendentalism he never lost touch with reality. It was this quality that he had so admired in Shakespeare. Melville did not merely write about the romantic adventures of a whaling voyage, but applied to it human psychology of what man really is and what he feels. Ahab is ambitious in the pursuit of his intent, we realise his rage and anguish. But, Ahab is a transcendentalist; to him the things of the world are but pasteboard masks.
The transcendental handling of material makes *Moby Dick* a novel of great significance since it transcends the fight between man and beast to a fight between man and Fate thus bestowing upon the book the dimensions of an epic.

The novel is representative of Melville's personal religious struggles and his personal views on the indifference of God and the cruelty of life. He makes traditional symbolism a vehicle for his personal views. The reliance on tradition may be much, but the artistic skill with which it is manoeuvred is Melville's own. Melville's dependence on tradition exceeds symbolism and can be found in the framework of his novel as well. He realised that in order to intensify and elevate his narration he would have to look for a design that was far removed from his times. To express the mysteriousness and magnificence of his adventures he turned to traditional styles. He not only followed the dramatic principles applied by Shakespeare, but did so in such a way that *Moby Dick* is dramatic in a metaphorical sense. The dramatic structure is loose like that of *The Aeneid*. This looseness allows for the book's expansive character.

The grand style of the book is enriched with "Melvillean language in the same intense and special sense in which one speaks of Virgilian language, of Shakespearean, or Miltonic. It is a creation, verbally speaking; a great artifice; a particular characterizing idiom; without it the book would not exist.... Like Virgil, with his *pius, ingens*
and immanis, or Shakespeare, with his rich, brave, sweet and gentle, Melville has his own verbal palette: it is chiefly made up of the words wild, wildly, and wildness, moody and moodiness, mystic and mystical... One has only to cite these words to suggest how intimately expressive they are of Moby Dick's dark, violent, and enigmatic theme. 46

The use of the right word creates, in keeping with the language of the epic the real atmosphere, expresses the author's view of it and elicits the desired response from the reader. In the true epic vein, Melville believed that language expresses ideas and recreates the time. Epic language is the language of the people.

46 Newton Arvin, pp. 162-163.