

EPIC QUALITIES IN MOBY-DICK

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EPIC QUALITIES IN MOBY-DICK

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

It is common practice to interpret new and novel experience in terms of past experience. It is not unusual, therefore, that literary critics have always attempted to explain new literary works in terms of the past. Critics approaching a new work for the first time cautiously seek to discover in it similarities to the masterpieces of the past. Often this is a safe practice that results in a fuller explanation of the author's purpose in the work under study. But, also quite often, this procedure has a damaging effect, as far as the critics are concerned, on the new work.

Benedetto Croce laments the fact that too frequently critics, before asking of a work of art "if it be expressive, and what it expresses, whether it speak or stammer, or be silent altogether, " ask instead "if it be obedient to the laws of the epic poem or to those of tragedy, to those of historical portraiture or to those of landscape painting."¹ Too often the critics fail to realize that any masterpiece

¹ Benedetto Croce, Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistic, p. 36.

worthy of the name is sui generis. It is a commonplace canon of literary criticism, sometimes overlooked, that each work of art must be judged on its own terms, for too often a great masterpiece is not merely a culmination of all that has gone before.

Every true work of art has violated some established class and upset the ideas of the critics, who have thus been obliged to enlarge the number of classes, until finally even this enlargement has proved too narrow, owing to the appearance of new works of art, which are naturally followed by new scandals, new upsettings, and--new enlargements. 2

Herman Melville's masterpiece Moby-Dick, since its publication in 1851, has been a controversial book. Superficially the book is a novel. But the definition of the novel as a fictitious prose narrative of considerable length fits every long prose work from Lady Murasaki's The Tale of the Genji to John Steinbeck's Cannery Row. Moby-Dick is certainly not the outgrowth of the novels that were being written during this period, at least not of the social novels, the novel of manners, of English and European authors.

Many critics, therefore, not satisfied with explaining Moby-Dick in terms of the novel, have sought analogies in other literary genres. Most often parallels have been drawn from epic and dramatic literature. Critics have called Moby-Dick either an epic or a tragedy. After examining the

evidence presented by both schools of thought, after establishing a workable definition of the epic and listing the most common epic devices, and after examining Moby-Dick in terms of this definition and discovering many of the epic devices in it, I propose the thesis that Melville has written an epic, not unlike the great epics of the past.

This thesis is the result of that examination. Chapter II is devoted to a historical survey of the criticism treating Moby-Dick as an epic. Chapter III is a consideration of the dramatic qualities found in the book which have led critics to think of Moby-Dick as a tragedy. Chapter IV contains a definition of the epic as a literary type, and a summary of characteristic epic devices. Chapter V, the main body of the thesis, is the application of the material found in Chapter IV to Moby-Dick. Chapter VI states the conclusion.

CHAPTER II

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO MOBY-DICK

From the beginning, critics found it hard to classify Moby-Dick successfully. One contemporary reviewer spoke of it as "an odd book, professing to be a novel."¹ The reviewer for Harper's Magazine, probably George Ripley, thought that the author had constructed "a romance, a tragedy, and a natural history, not without numerous gratuitous suggestions on psychology, ethics, and theology."² Later in the same review the author said, "The plot becomes mere intense and tragic, as it approaches the denouement,"³ suggesting affinities with the drama.

Melville's friend, Evert Duyckinck, in his review for The Literary World, found the book "a natural-historical, philosophical, romantic account of the person, habits, manners, ideas of the great sperm whale."⁴ In a second review for the following issue of The Literary World, Duyckinck expressed the feeling that Moby-Dick contains elements

¹ Literary Gazette, XXXV (December 6, 1851), 841.

² Harper's Magazine, IV (December, 1851), 137.

³ Ibid.

⁴ The Literary World, IX (November 15, 1851), 381.

reminiscent of German drama, and he called Ahab "the Faust of the quarter-deck."⁵

None of the reviewers writing immediately after the publication of Moby-Dick in 1851 spoke of the book directly as an epic; on the contrary, analogies with the drama seem to have been favored. However, as early as 1899 Archibald MacMechan defined Moby-Dick as "at once the epic and encyclopedia of whaling. . . a monument to the honor of an extinct race of daring seamen."⁶

Appearing two years after the centennial of Melville's birth in 1921, Raymond Weaver's biography did much to promote a revival of interest in the author and his work. Although Weaver did not devote much space to the criticism and interpretation of Melville's individual works, he praised Moby-Dick as "indisputably the greatest whaling novel, and 'a hideous and intolerable allegory.'"⁷ After calling Moby-Dick a novel, Weaver compared passages in the book to passages from such dramatists as Dekker, Webster, Massinger, and Fletcher.

In 1923 in his Studies in Classic American Literature D. H. Lawrence confidently called Moby-Dick "an epic of the

⁵Ibid., (November 22, 1951), p. 403.

⁶Archibald MacMechan, "The Best Sea Story Ever Written," The Queen's Quarterly, VII (October, 1899), 130.

⁷Raymond Weaver, Herman Melville, p. 27.

sea such as no man has equalled."⁸ But in 1926 John Freeman, feeling that Moby-Dick could not be classified, said, "Moby-Dick is a novel, if it can be termed a novel, to consider in isolation."⁹ Later he spoke of "the drama of Ahab and Moby-Dick,"¹⁰ and, finally, he referred to the book as a "parable of an eternal strife."¹¹ One year later, firmer in his convictions, Van Wyck Brooks called Moby-Dick "our sole American epic . . . It revives in a sense the theme of the most ancient epic of the English-speaking peoples."¹²

In his biography of Melville, published in 1929, Lewis Mumford said that "the conventional critic has dismissed Moby-Dick because it is 'not a novel' or if it is a novel, its story is marred by all sorts of extraneous material, history, natural history, philosophy, mythological excursions, what not."¹³ For his part Mumford stated that "Moby-Dick is a poetic epic,"¹⁴ yet "the epic and mythic quality has been misunderstood because those who examined the book thought of

⁸D. H. Lawrence, Studies in Classic American Literature, p. 237.

⁹John Freeman, Herman Melville, p. 114.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., p. 116.

¹²Van Wyck Brooks, Emerson and Others, p. 205.

¹³Lewis Mumford, Herman Melville, p. 177.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 181.

the epic in terms of Homer, and the myth itself in relation to some obvious hero of antiquity."¹⁵ Consequently, Mumford wrote that Moby-Dick cannot be interpreted in terms of the past, for it 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. 16

Mumford concluded, therefore, that "the best handbook on whaling is also--I say this scrupulously--the best tragic epic of modern times and one of the fine poetic works of all time."¹⁷

In 1932 Padriac Colum recognized Moby-Dick as a modern-day epic also.

On the surface Melville's book is a novel; it is a prose narrative of a certain length dealing with possible men and possible events. But below the surface it is different. The men are possible, but they are also fabulous. The prose loosens into extraordinary rhythms. The event is possible, but it is also unique--it is nothing less than the pursuit of the "mightiest animated mass that has survived the flood." What Herman Melville proposes to himself is a theme not for a novel but for an epic. 18

15
Ibid., p. 190.

16
Ibid., p. 193.

17
Ibid.

18
Padriac Colum, A Half-Day's Ride, p. 175.

Colum also said that Melville's characters are generalized like the characters of an epic and spoke of Captain Ahab as "an Achilles of the sea."¹⁹

Yvor Winters pointed out that Moby-Dick has always defied classification because it combines similarities of structure from various literary types to produce a new structure. Winters said, however, that it is less a novel or a drama than an epic poem. "The book, then, partakes in some measure of the qualities of a novel and of a tragic drama; but essentially it is an epic poem."²⁰ He added that "the book is not only a great epic; it is profoundly an American epic."²¹

In 1941 in American Renaissance F. O. Matthiessen noted that modern critics had usually described Moby-Dick as an epic. But Matthiessen preferred to compare the book to the drama, for he said that "if we are to establish the genre to which this book belongs, it is equally clear that Melville thought of Ahab's actions in dramatic terms."²²

Writing in 1944, William Sedgwick said that Moby-Dick fits no set definition.

¹⁹
Ibid.

²⁰ Yvor Winters, In Defense of Reason, p. 220.

²¹
Ibid.

²²
F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance, p. 415.

For there are no established definitions to apply to Moby-Dick. Where one critic has held out his critical yardstick, just there a succeeding critic should be most on his guard and not follow blindly. Is Moby-Dick a novel? It is no more a novel than it is an epic and no more an epic than a tragedy-- in the sense that Shakespeare, for instance, conceived tragedy. Moby-Dick is not to be comprehended unless, like the dead whale in the distance, it is seen in infinite perspectives. 23

Richard Chase in 1949 was more certain of his definition, for he called Moby-Dick "an American epic. So far it seems to be the American epic."²⁴ Chase believed that an epic is the poet's response to the myth which his culture gives him. In this case Chase thought that the myth given to Melville is one of capitalism, and "Ahab is the epic transmutation of the American free enterpriser, and the White Whale is the transmutation of the implicit meaning of free enterprise."²⁵

In his biography of Melville, Geoffrey Stone recognized the strong nationalistic feeling in Moby-Dick that is so very definitely a characteristic of the epic. "As he (Melville) pursues this inquiry, or relates his story, one term of his free-tumbling metaphors is again and again an

23 William Sedgwick, Herman Melville, p. 83.

24 Richard Chase, Herman Melville, p. 100.

25 Ibid., p. 101.

American phenomenon."²⁶ But Stone obviously favored the drama as a possible definition for Moby-Dick, for he felt that "there is no doubt that the qualities of the tragedy and drama in Moby-Dick recall Shakespeare."²⁷

Perhaps the most conclusive statement that Moby-Dick is an epic comes from Newton Arvin in his biography of Melville, published in 1950. "If one must look for analogies that will do a little to express the effect Moby-Dick has on us in form--and they can do no more than that at the very most--it is not to tragedy that one should turn but to heroic poetry, to the epic."²⁸ Arvin believed that what the reader of Moby-Dick "feels in its spacious narrative movement is not unlike what he feels in the narrative movement of the Iliad, of the Odyssey, and even of the more 'literary' poems that derive from them, the Aeneid, the Lusiads."²⁹

It has been shown, then, that critics are not prepared to accept Moby-Dick as a novel, but as to just exactly what Moby-Dick is, there is much disagreement. Reviewers

²⁶ Geoffrey Stone, Melville, p. 176.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 90.

²⁸ Newton Arvin, Herman Melville, p. 156.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 157.

contemporary with the publication of the book recognized the difficulty of classifying Moby-Dick. For the most part they looked upon the book as a novel with dramatic characteristics. As early as 1899 the book was called an epic. Since then many reviewers have felt that the subject matter, structure, and characters make the book an epic comparable to the Iliad, the Odyssey, and the Aeneid. Other critics feel that the book is an epic but not comparable to any in the past. They believe that it is a modern epic arising out of American mythology. On the other hand, reviewers recognizing the undeniable dramatic similarities of the book have called Moby-Dick a tragedy.

CHAPTER III

MOBY-DICK AS TRAGEDY

In the preceding chapter attention was called to the fact that many critics have called Moby-Dick a tragedy. Before discussing the epic characteristics of the book, it would probably be wise to consider the evidence advanced by those who favor a dramatic interpretation. This chapter, then, will be devoted to a consideration of the dramatic characteristics found in Moby-Dick.

† In 1920 E. L. Grant Watson published an article on Moby-Dick in The London Mercury in which he expressed his belief that the book is essentially dramatic; especially toward the end is it "of the inevitable structure of the tragedy."¹

† George Homans, stressing the autobiographical nature of Moby-Dick as well as Mardi and Pierre, said, "My argument is lost if I do not hammer home that Mardi, Moby-Dick, and Pierre are dramatizations of Melville's spiritual life."²

† Arguing that Moby-Dick is a drama, F. O. Matthiessen reminded the reader that Melville "made Ishmael step forth

¹
E. L. Grant Watson, "Moby Dick," The London Mercury, III (December, 1920), 186.

²
George C. Homans, "The Dark Angel: The Tragedy of Herman Melville," New England Quarterly, V (October, 1932), 711.

in an 'Epilogue' to say, 'The drama's done'; and from the moment of introducing his dramatis personae, he had reckoned with his problem as that of a 'tragic dramatist' who was trying to endow 'a poor old whale-hunter' with the dignity of a Shakespearean hero."³

† Henry A. Meyers considered Moby-Dick a drama well suited to be the tragedy of an age.

With its heightened and impassioned language, its substitution of imaginative for homely detail, its hardness relieved only by the pathos of little Pip, its revelation of the only great tragic hero of nineteenth-century American literature, its sense of necessity and finality, Moby-Dick is like no other novel. It must be understood as drama, for in it Melville had arrived at the tragic view of life. And one understands its tragic import by understanding the story, by grasping the relation of the hero's character to his fate.⁴

That Melville conceived Moby-Dick more specifically in terms of Shakespearean drama was brought out by Montgomery Belgion, who said, "The most mighty sign under which Moby-Dick was written is, then, the sign of Shakespearean drama."⁵ Charles Olson also thought that Shakespeare was the inspiration for Moby-Dick, but he said that of the plays "it was Lear that had the deep creative impact."⁶

³Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 415.

⁴Henry A. Myers, "Captain Ahab's Discovery," New England Quarterly, XV (March, 1942), 20.

⁵Montgomery Belgion, "Heterodoxy on Moby-Dick," Sewanee Review, LV (Winter, 1947), 124.

⁶Charles Olson, Call Me Ishmael, p. 47.

†There are two aspects of Moby-Dick which critics point to most often as proof of the fact that the book is essentially a tragedy. They are the frequent use of dramatic devices and the character of Ahab.

†It is known that Melville was a student of Elizabethan drama and that in 1849 he had begun to read all of Shakespeare in a handsome new edition. This copy of Shakespeare's plays with the underscorings and notes that Melville made in it still exists. It is neither strange, then, that Shakespeare influenced him greatly at this time nor that Moby-Dick should contain evidences of Shakespearean drama.

×Among the obvious stylistic devices borrowed from the drama are the stage directions that accompany some of the chapters. The subheading to Chapter XXIX is "Enter Ahab; To Him, Stubb." There are many other chapters to which Melville has added stage directions. The main ones are Chapter XXXVI, "Enter Ahab: Then, all"; Chapter XXXVII, "The cabin; by the stern windows; Ahab sitting alone, and gazing out"; Chapter XXXVIII, "By the mainmast; Starbuck leaning against it"; Chapter XXXIX, "Stubb solus, and mending a brace"; and Chapter XL, "Foresail rises and discovers the watch standing, lounging, leaning, and lying in various attitudes, all singing in chorus."

Chapters XXXVII, XXXVIII, XXXIX all present one figure speaking alone, a device certainly reminiscent of the

soliloquies employed by Shakespeare. Another soliloquy similar to Shakespeare and other Elizabethan dramatists occurs in the chapter entitled "The Sphinx," in which Melville has Ahab lean over the side of the ship and address the head of a whale suspended there in a manner not unlike that in which Hamlet addresses the skull of Yorick. N. B. Fagin associated this dramatic device with a peculiarly modern kind of soliloquy which he termed the 'interior monologue'.⁷

The structure of Chapter XL is exactly like that in the scene of a play. The chapter opens with the sailors singing; dialogue follows among various members of the crew. There is not one line of exposition in this chapter, which is capable of being presented unaltered on the stage. There are many incidents in Moby-Dick that have a definite dramatic quality but which are not strictly speaking "scenes." Examples are the nailing of the gold doubloon on the masthead, the toast of the three harpooners from their harpoons, and the meetings of the Pegued with other ships, such as the Rachel and the Jereboam, and the appearance of the corposants. F. O. Matthiessen thought that the period of the final chase, which constitutes the longest sustained episode in the book, is

⁷ N. B. Fagin, "Herman Melville and the Interior Monologue," American Literature, VI (January, 1935), 433-434.

"the finest piece of dramatic writing in American literature, though shaped with no reference to the stage."⁸

Melville also makes use of stage properties to achieve a theatrical effect. Examples of this are many, but a few of the more important ones deserve mention. Early in the book Melville has Ahab throw his pipe overboard in a symbolic gesture, and later in a scene of great dramatic significance Ahab nails a Spanish doubloon to the masthead, the reward for the one who first sights Moby-Dick. In a scene that recalls Richard's throwing down the mirror in Shakespeare's Richard II, Ahab smashes his quadrant.

As the climax of the book approaches, Melville skillfully employs dramatic omens and foreshadowings. The night of the typhoon is precluded by the corposants, which arouse a feeling of awe in the sailors. The compasses are ruined by the storm, the log-line breaks, the life buoy sinks, and a sailor is drowned.⁹

Aside from the dramatic devices used in Moby-Dick the critics have pointed to the character of Ahab as convincing proof that Moby-Dick is a tragedy. They see in Ahab Aristotle's ideal tragic hero and in Moby-Dick a drama of revenge.

⁸Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 421.

⁹Ibid., p. 420.

X The central meaning of Moby-Dick, like that of every tragedy, lies in the relation of character to event. Ahab, a man with a Catskill eagle in his soul, possesses the unyielding will which leads to the iron way of heroes, a capacity for feeling far beyond the ordinary, and a large share of intellectual curiosity. Convinced by a striking misfortune that the evil in his life is in some way identified with Moby Dick, he determines to pursue the white whale to the ends of the earth. His monomania is close enough to the nature of the ordinary pursuit of men to draw the whalers into the chase. In the course of the pursuit Ahab can find no contentment in the purpose from which he cannot swerve; he feels therefore that there is a meaning in life which eludes him. The meeting between man and whale results in the loss of Ahab's ship and of his life. Yet his spirit is unbroken, and at the end he has his flash of insight, the discovery that his topmost greatness lies in his topmost grief, that his unconquerable spirit and his unyielding will are meaningless without the suffering which brings them out and gives them significance. Only Ahab, he discovers, is equal to Ahab. His own nature is the secret of both the heights of his fortune and the depths of his misfortune. For only he can feel the fierce exultation of a purpose grooved in iron who can also feel the utmost agony of defeat. 10

X Henry Myers also points out that Reversal of Situation and Recognition, two aspects of the plot of the tragedy, are present in Moby-Dick. Reversal of Situation occurs when Ahab in his attempt to destroy the source of evil in his life, symbolized by the whale, is himself destroyed. Recognition comes when Ahab realizes that he himself has brought on the tragedy. "Oh, now I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief. . . Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquerable whale. . . ' So at last comes the answer to Ahab's quest. The moment of insight in which

he sees that his grief and his greatness are but the two sides of his nature, one impossible without the other, is Ahab's great discovery and the key to the tragic meaning of Moby-Dick.¹¹

Two critics, F. O. Matthiessen and W. H. Auden, have pointed out that Ishmael serves the same function in Moby-Dick, i. e., an observer of the action, but not a participant, as the chorus does in the Greek drama. "But," Auden says, "Ishmael is not like the Greek chorus, the eternal average man, for he isn't a character at all. To be a character one must will and act, and Ishmael has no will, only consciousness."¹²

It has been shown that there are definite reasons for calling Moby-Dick a drama; but, for the most part, critics have pointed to the stylistic devices, which Melville borrowed from the many plays he had read, for proof of their argument. Some critics have called attention to the similarities of Melville's conception of Captain Ahab to Aristotle's definition of the ideal tragic hero in support of the theory of Moby-Dick as a piece of dramatic literature. I think that the critics who have used this argument come nearer convincing us than do those who merely point to the

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Ibid.

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W. H. Auden, "The Christian Tragic Hero," New York Times Book Review, December 16, 1945, p. 21.

external devices. The facts are obviously against trying to prove that structurally Moby-Dick is a drama. How can the episodic nature of the plot, the long expository passages, the innumerable pages devoted to cetology be reconciled to the laws of the drama? Drama depends for its effect on the concentration and compactness of its action. The action of Moby-Dick is loose and unfocused.

X A more rewarding approach to understanding Moby-Dick as a tragic drama lies in a consideration of the philosophy in which Melville conceived his book. The story of the fall of Captain Ahab is a subject ideally suited for tragic treatment. How ideally suited it is for a tragedy can be seen in the definition of a tragedy.

Since the meaning of tragedy has undergone many changes from time to time, it is difficult to formulate a definition that is all inclusive. However, since there have always been certain aspects of tragedy that have never changed, a workable definition can be made. Aristotle defined tragedy as "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude."¹³ Aristotle went on to point out the kind of character he thought proper for tragedy. He is a "man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error

¹³
S. H. Butcher, Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art, p. 23.

or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous.¹⁵ Ashley Thorndike derived this definition of tragedy from the Poetics:

Tragedy is a form of drama exciting the emotions of pity and fear. Its action should be single and complete, presenting a reversal of fortune, involving persons renowned and of superior attainments, and it should be written in poetry and embellished with every kind of artistic expression. 15

But Thorndike said that this definition falls short of describing Greek tragedy completely and that it is inadequate for modern tragedy because it puts the emphasis on action and not on characterization. After analyzing later tragedy, especially Shakespearean, Thorndike formulated his own definition:

The action of a tragedy should represent a conflict of wills, or of wills with circumstance, or will with itself, and should therefore be based on the characters involved. A typical tragedy is concerned with a great personality engaged in a struggle that ends disastrously. 16

Aristotle began his definition of tragedy by saying that the tragic action must be "serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude." By "serious" Aristotle meant that the action of the tragedy must deal with problems that are of serious significance to humanity. In Moby-Dick Melville treats of the nature of Evil in the world and of the dangers

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Ashley Thorndike, Tragedy, p. 8.

16

Ibid., p. 9.

of revenge and pride. Certainly these themes are basic and vast enough in scope to embrace all humanity.

✕ Aristotle next required that the action of the drama should be complete. He discussed this aspect of tragedy later in the Poetics under his requirements for a successful plot. He thought that the dramatic action should have a beginning, middle, and an end. In other words, he believed that the action should have a beginning, an orderly progression from this beginning, and an end that is the logical and inevitable outcome of that which has gone before. In Moby-Dick the tragic action is started with Ahab's setting out in search of the whale, the action becomes more complex as Ahab is inextricably involved in his fate, and finally is brought to a close with the sinking of the Pegued. Like the action of the drama, then, Moby-Dick has a beginning, a middle, and end. But Moby-Dick has more, and this is where the book differs from the drama. The action of Moby-Dick is impeded time and again by the introduction of things extraneous to the forward movement of the action. The plot of Moby-Dick is episodic and not dramatic. Aristotle perhaps also meant more broadly by "completeness" that the drama must have artistic unity. In other words, the drama must be, organically, a complete unit. It must leave the reader with a sense of wholeness and finality. Moby-Dick certainly meets this requirement.

By "magnitude" Aristotle meant that the action must have consequences that transcend the affairs of one man. It has been mentioned that Aristotle said that the ideal tragic hero must be a person who is "highly renowned and prosperous" so that the fall from his former prominence will increase the magnitude of his personal tragedy as well as of those whose fate depends on him. Renaissance and neo-classical critics limited their tragic heroes to kings and persons of the highest rank so that their fall would involve whole nations.

\The tragedy of Ahab has the magnitude which Aristotle required. Superficially the punishment for Ahab's sin involves all the people aboard the Pequod. Their fate is tied up with the fate of their captain. Melville goes into great detail to explain, however, that the crew of the Pequod represents all of humanity. Melville has collected representatives of ages, nations, races, and occupations, obviously to symbolize humanity as a whole. The fall of Captain Ahab, then, has universal significance and is of the greatest magnitude.

\Aristotle defined the purpose of tragedy as a purgation of the emotions of pity and fear. Pity is aroused in the spectator at the sight of the suffering of the tragic hero. If the character of the hero is not one to excite pity in the spectators, then the tragedy is a failure. For this reason Aristotle went to some length in his Poetics to explain

the type of hero suited for the tragedy. He said that the protagonist should be a man intermediate between extreme goodness and extreme wickedness. He must be a man who is brought low through some shortcoming. This shortcoming in the character of the protagonist has been called the tragic flaw.

Early in the book Melville stresses the exceptional character of Captain Ahab. He calls him

a man of greatly superior natural force, with a globular brain and a ponderous heart; who has also by the stillness and seclusion of many long night-watches in the remotest waters, and beneath constellations never seen here at the north, been led to think untraditionally and independently; receiving all nature's sweet or savage impressions fresh from her own virgin voluntary and confiding breast, and thereby chiefly, but with some help from accidental advantages, to learn a bold and nervous lofty language--that man makes one in a whole nation's census--a mighty pageant creature, formed for noble tragedies. 17

Melville also points out the tragic side of Ahab's nature:

Nor will it at all detract from him, dramatically regarded, if either by birth or other circumstances, he have what seems a half wilful over-ruling morbidness at the bottom of his nature. For all men tragically great are made so through a certain morbidness. Be sure of this, O young ambition, all mortal greatness is but disease. 18

After Ishmael signs to ship on the Pequod, Captain Peleg gives this description of the ship's captain:

17
Moby-Dick, p. 73.

18
Ibid.

He's a queer man, Captain Ahab--so some think--but a good one. Oh, thou'lt like him well enough; no fear, no fear. He's a grand, ungodly, god-like man, Captain Ahab; deesn't speak much; but, when he does speak, then you may well listen. Mark ye, be forewarned; Ahab's above the common; Ahab's been in colleges, as well as 'mong the cannibals; been used to deeper wonders than the waves; fixed his fiery lance in mightier, stranger foes than whales. His lance! aye, the keenest and the surest that out of all our isle! Oh! he ain't Captain Bildad; no, and he ain't Captain Peleg; he's Ahab, boy; and Ahab of old, thou knowest, was a crowned king. . . . I know Captain Ahab well; I've sailed with him as mate years ago; I know what he is--a good man--not a pious, good man like Bildad, but a swearing good man--something like me--only there's a great deal more of him. . . . Ahab has his humanities. 19

X Perhaps it is no coincidence that Melville's own conception of the character of Ahab is similar to Aristotle's definition of the ideal tragic hero. Whether or not the similarity was deliberate or not is unimportant, for it is obvious that Melville has created a character ideally suited for tragedy.

X The reader learns before he ever sees Ahab that he is a good and noble man. Unfortunately, on a previous whaling voyage his leg was bitten off by a sperm whale. Ahab thinks that the whale's action was sheer malevolence and becomes moody and reflective over the loss of his leg. Continuous brooding over it warps Ahab's mind, but we do not see to what extent his mind has been affected until his announcement that he wishes to turn the whaling voyage into a pursuit of

Moby-Dick. Vengeance on the white whale has become the obsession of his mind. He thinks of nothing else but the day when he will meet Moby-Dick in mortal combat. This unswerving determination is the tragic flaw in the character of Ahab. True, it is the source of much of our admiration for the old man, but it is also the source of his destruction. For the most part, Ahab confines himself to his cabin where he plots his revenge. The thought never leaves him; at night he is haunted by nightmares. Melville sees in him a kinship with Aeschylus' tragic hero Prometheus: "God help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee; and he whose intense thinking thus makes him a Prometheus; a vulture feeds upon that heart for ever; that vulture the very creature he creates."²⁰

We see to what extent Ahab's pride in his own self-determination has led him when, after he has announced to the crew his intentions of pursuing Moby-Dick, he says,

Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun
if it insulted me. For could the sun do that, then
could I the other; since there is ever a sort of fair
play herein, jealousy presiding over all creations.
But not my master, man, is even that fair play.
Who's over me? 21

Such hybris cries out for instant nemesis. Ahab in defying the Divine Order incurs the wrath of the Gods, just as Prometheus did when he defied the rule of Zeus, and he

²⁰
Ibid., p. 200.

²¹
Ibid., p. 162.

must be punished. Any hero of Greek tragedy who uttered words similar to those of Captain Ahab could expect the Gods to smite him. In the tragedy of Captain Ahab, Melville shows that the determined expression of an individual will that is in conflict with the natural order of things is doomed. Man and God can live in harmony only so long as Man keeps his place. It is the duty of Fate to see that he does.

\ In conceiving Moby-Dick in a spirit such as this, Melville shows an affinity as much with Greek tragedy as with Shakespearean. It is interesting to note that Melville wrote "Eschylus' Tragedies" on the inner cover of his copy of Shakespeare.

\ The tragic inevitability of Ahab's destruction is apparent from the first. The old squaw Tistig, at Gayhead, said that Ahab's name would be prophetic, and Ahab was marked by Fate with a scar running from his head down his neck. And an old Indian among the crew said that the scar came upon him "not in the fury of any mortal fray, but in an elemental strife at sea."²²

\ It is in the character of Ahab, however, that we see the tragic inevitability of his fate. When the book opens, Ahab, by his fatal flaw is destined for tragedy. As the

book progresses, his end becomes apparent, for his monomania brought on by rage and anger develops until it becomes a frenzied madness.

It has been pointed out that Aristotle thought that the purpose of tragedy is the purgation of the emotions of pity and fear in the spectator, which Aristotle called catharsis. The tragedy of Moby-Dick has catharsis. Pity is aroused in the reader by Ahab's suffering which is incommensurate with his guilt. Pity is also aroused by the death of the innocent crew members, who also pay for Ahab's fault. The emotion of fear in the reader is closely related to that of pity, for while he is experiencing pity for the fate of Ahab and the crew, he is also disturbed by the fear that a similar fate might overtake him. He is afraid that if he becomes obsessed with an idée fixe or if he allows himself to be drawn in by someone else's obsession, he will perish as did Ahab and the crew.

In summary then, it has been shown that many critics have tried to prove Moby-Dick a tragedy by pointing to the many dramatic devices which Melville used. Many critics have felt such a strong Shakespearean influence that they have argued that the book has the familiar five acts of an Elizabethan tragedy.²³

²³
Arvin, op. cit., p. 155.

Later in this chapter it was suggested that Moby-Dick can best be explained in terms of tragedy by calling attention not to the dramatic devices which Melville used but to the philosophy in which he conceived his book. Then, in order to prove that the philosophy behind Moby-Dick is essentially tragic, the book was examined in the light of Aristotle's classic theory of tragedy. Enough similarities to Aristotle in Moby-Dick, such as Melville's conception of character, plot, struggle, and catharsis, were pointed out to indicate that a tragic interpretation of the book is not without foundation.

CHAPTER IV

THEORY OF THE EPIC

The epic as a subject for literary criticism has had a long and illustrious history. When we look for a definition of the epic as a literary form, scores of critics down through the centuries from Aristotle to Clayton Hamilton clamor for our attention. Because Aristotle derived his definition from Homer, much subsequent discussion of the epic has been necessarily a consideration of Homer. In fact, an epic "might well have been defined as 'a poem written in imitation of the Iliad.'"¹ As more epics were written, however, definitions were enlarged, and we find that critics seldom agree completely on just what constitutes an epic. Requirements which some critics have thought most important others have laid aside as unnecessary. Nevertheless there have always been broad, general characteristics which we always associate with the epic.

The first systematic consideration of the literary type known as the epic is found in Aristotle's Poetics. Aristotle's treatment of the epic is not entirely satisfactory because he discusses the epic with the drama pointing out

¹ W. Macneile Dixon, English Epic and Heroic Poetry, p. 1.

similarities and differences between them. In only two of the twenty-six sections is the epic treated as a literary type by itself. Aristotle thought that the epic and tragedy were alike in many respects. He said that they were both "modes of imitation,"² that the epic is divided into four types like the drama, and that it must contain "Reversals of Situation, Recognition, and Scenes of Suffering."³ He believed that the plot of the epic, as of a tragedy, ought "to be constructed on dramatic principles. It should have for its subject a single action, whole and complete with a beginning, middle, and an end."⁴ This unity of action is the only one of the three "unities" that Aristotle applied to the epic. Tragedy is supposed to confine itself to a single revolution of the sun, "whereas the Epic action has no limits of time."⁵

Although the epic draws its subject matter from history, it is not like history in that it does not try to cover all the events that occur in one particular period. In other words, the poet must practice artistic selection as did Homer in making the wrath of Achilles the theme of the Iliad.

² Butcher, op. cit., p. 7.

³ Ibid., p. 91.

⁴ Ibid., p. 89.

⁵ Ibid., p. 23.

He never attempts to make the whole war of Troy the subject of his poem, though that war had a beginning and an end. It would have been too vast a theme, and not easily embraced in a single view. If, again, he had kept it within moderate limits, it must have been over-complicated by the variety of the incidents. As it is, he detaches a single portion, and admits as episodes many events from the general story of the war--such as the Catalogue of the ships and others--thus diversifying the poem. ⁶

Aristotle felt that epic poetry had a great advantage over tragedy because it could depict actions happening simultaneously. In other words, the narrative form of the epic permits the inclusion of many episodes which "if relevant to the subject, add mass and dignity to the poem," are conducive to "grandeur of effect, to diverting the mind of the hearer, and relieving the story."⁷

Aristotle did not list the qualities of epic characters; he said only that "Epic poetry agrees with Tragedy in so far as it is an imitation of characters of a higher type."⁸ But Aristotle stressed the importance of language in the epic. "As for the meter, the heroic measure (hexameter) has proved its fitness by the test of experience. If a narrative poem in any other metre or in many metres were now composed, it would be found incongruous."⁹

Aristotle said that the element of the wonderful is required in tragedy but that the epic can achieve the

⁶ Ibid., p. 89.

⁷ Ibid., p. 93.

⁸ Ibid., p. 21.

⁹ Ibid., p. 93.

wonderful easier than the tragedy because it can make use of the irrational. "The irrational on which the wonderful depends for its chief effects, has wider scope in Epic poetry, because there the person acting is not seen."¹⁰

Aristotle simply meant that an event which would seem absurd if it were acted before an audience will not appear absurd in description or narration. Aristotle cited Hector's running from Achilles as an example of what he meant. Aristotle, consequently, said that "the poet should prefer probable impossibilities to improbable possibilities."¹¹

After Aristotle, the most important critic of the epic in antiquity is Horace. Although there are comparatively few remarks about the epic in the Ars Poetica, the importance of this work lies in the fact that it has been repeatedly referred to by subsequent critics. The passages in the Ars Poetica that are most significant to the study of the epic are those that deal with the subject matter, the meter, and the plot. To begin with, Horace warned the poet to choose a simple subject commensurate with his ability.¹² That Horace was writing in imitation of Homer is obvious from his

¹⁰
Ibid.

¹¹
Ibid.

¹²
Horace, Satires, Epistles, and Ars Poetica, p. 453.

remarks on verse and plot. Concerning verse, he said, "In what measure the exploits of kings and captains and the sorrow of war may be written, Homer has shown."¹³ Horace warned the poet against a too auspicious beginning and advocated beginning the story in medias res.¹⁴

There was nothing of immediate importance in epic theory produced in the field of literary criticism during the Middle Ages. For our next consideration of the epic we must, therefore, turn to Italy during the Renaissance. Three important critics writing about the epic in Italy at this time were Trissino, Castelvetro, and Tasso.

Trissino was the first to introduce the Aristotelian theory of the epic into modern literary criticism. He devoted an entire section of his Poetica to a consideration of the epic. Just as Aristotle had said earlier, Trissino pointed out that the epic is like tragedy in that it deals with illustrious men and illustrious actions. Again like Aristotle, he said that the epic was similar to tragedy because it had a single action but that it differed from tragedy in not having the action limited to a certain interval of time. Trissino, like other critics of the Renaissance, thought that the vastness of design and largeness of detail were necessary to the grandiose character

¹³
Ibid., p. 457.

¹⁴
Ibid., p. 463.

of the epic. He also criticized the romantic poets for depicting the impossible since Aristotle recommended a probable impossibility instead of an improbable possibility.¹⁵

Castelvetro differed from Aristotle in regard to the unity of the epic because he felt that poetry was imaginative history. Castelvetro felt that since history dealt with the whole life of an individual or with many actions of many people that there was no reason why epic poetry could not do likewise. Castelvetro recognized, however, that a poet writing a successful epic which dealt with one action of one person showed signs of ingenuity and excellence.¹⁶

Tasso tried to reconcile the Aristotelian theory of the epic with the romantic epics, such as the Orlando Furioso and Orlando Inamorata. He felt that the perfect and most pleasing form of the epic would deal with the chivalrous themes of the romantic epic and at the same time have that unity of structure which, according to Aristotle, is essential to every epic. Tasso thought that the subject matter of the epic should be drawn from history because history gives the action that semblance of truth necessary to create verisimilitude. He insisted that the history be of Christianity, for he felt that pagan religion

15

J. E. Spingarn, A History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance, pp. 109-110.

was unfit for the epic. But he cautioned against dealing with themes connected with the articles of Christian faith because such themes would be unchangeable and confine the freedom of the poet's imagination. Tasse also felt that the best time in history would be one neither too ancient nor too modern. He mentioned the times of Charlemagne and Arthur as being best suited for epic treatment. Finally, Tasse believed that the events themselves must have grandeur and nobility.¹⁷

The French critics of the epic picked up where the Italians left off, but epic theory did not reach its fullest development in France until the seventeenth century. The most important of the sixteenth-century French critics is Ronsard. In the two prefaces to his Franciade he set down his remarks on the epic. He compared the poet with the historian, saying that the epic poet should not follow the method of the historian. The poet's greatest concern should be that of verisimilitude. Ronsard said that the epic poet should have a knowledge of history, medicine, anatomy, law, and all related fields in order to make his poems convincing. Ronsard felt that the poet could begin his action in the middle, as Horace advised, or that he could even begin it at the end. He recommended the use of such devices as

¹⁷
Ibid., pp. 119-121.

speeches, dreams, prophecies, pictures, auguries, fantastic visions, and appearances of gods and demons. Ronsard, like Tasso, thought that the action should not be of a period too recent. He also thought that the action in the epic should be limited to one year.¹⁸

Although he wrote his own epic in decasyllables, Ronsard favored the Alexandrine as the proper meter for the epic. He felt that the language should possess dignity and be aristocratic in tone. He believed that the poet should take great pains to ornament and embellish his language. He agreed with Du Bellay that it was the function of the poet to enrich the language even if it meant coining new words or reviving older ones.¹⁹

In the seventeenth century the most authoritative treatise on the epic was written by Le Bossu. He defined the epic as "un discours invente avec art, pour former les moeurs par des instructions deguisees sous les allegories d'une action importante, qui est racontee en vers d'une maniere vrai-semblable, divertissante et merveilleuse."²⁰ Le Bossu stressed the didactic purpose of the epic. He felt that the subject of the epic should be a

¹⁸H. T. Swedenberg, Jr., The Theory of the Epic in England: 1650-1800, pp. 14-15.

¹⁹Vernon Hall, Jr., Renaissance Literary Criticism, pp. 115-117.

²⁰Le Bossu, Traite du poeme epique (Paris, 1693), pp. 9-10, quoted in Swedenberg, op. cit., p. 16.

fable, like those of Aesop, around which the poet could weave a veil of allegory in order to point up some moral lesson.

In England Edmund Spenser was influenced greatly in his Fairie Queene by the elements of allegory and didacticism. In his letter to Sir Walter Raleigh in which he explained the purpose of his poem he called it a "continued allegory" and said,

The generall and therefore of all the booke is to fashion a gentelman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline: Which for that I conceived shoulde be most plausible and pleasing, being coloured with an historicall fiction, the which the most part of men delight to read, rather for variety of matter, then for profite of the ensample: I chose the historye of king Arthure, as most fitte for the excellency of his person, being made famous by many mens former workes, and also furthest from the danger of envy, and suspicion of present time. In which I have followed all the antique Poets historicall. 21

Spenser also pointed out the difference between the historian and the poet to explain his beginning in medias res.

For the methode of a Poet historical is not such, as of an Historiographer. For an Historiographer discourseth of affayres orderly as they were done, accounting as well the times as the actions; but a Poet thrusteth into the midst, even where it most concerneth him and there recouring to the things forepaste, and divining of things to come, maketh a pleasing Analysis of all. 22

21
Edmund Spenser, Works, I, 167.

22
Ibid., pp. 168-169.

Before writing Paradise Lost, Milton debated over which literary form to use in order to achieve the greatest harmony between form and subject. In fact, he wrote the first draft of Paradise Lost in the form of a Greek tragedy. In the Reason of Church-Government Urg'd Against Prelaty, written in 1641, we find him debating whether to follow Aristotle or nature in writing his poem.²³ In Book IX of Paradise Lost he said that although his subject differed from the orthodox epic, he was sure that it was more worthy of epic poetry than the more common ones. Concerning the language of the epic, Milton advocated the use of blank verse.

Sir William Davenant's preface to Gondibert, published in 1650, is a landmark in the history of epic theory in England for two reasons. First, it contained much of the theory of the epic that was to be popular in England for the next hundred and fifty years; second, in it Davenant brought together ideas that had appeared on the Continent and in England prior to his time.²⁴ An important reason, too, for considering Davenant is the fact that Melville brought back from England an edition of Davenant,²⁵ and we are probably

²³ John Milton, Works, III, 237.

²⁴ Swedenberg, op. cit., p. 43.

²⁵ Leon Howard, Herman Melville, p. 165.

safe in assuming that he knew the preface to Gondibert.

Davenant respected the eminence accorded Homer by subsequent epic poets, but he felt that slavish imitation of Homer or any other epic poet was undesirable because it prevented progress. What he advocated was a new epic form based, for the most part, on Tasso. To begin with, his epic was to have a Christian theme because that would be most conducive to virtue. The action of the epic should be taken from some former time because the present would take away the liberty of the poet and make a historian of him. He thought that the action should, however, be credible. The emotions proper to the epic are love and ambition because they are so often the consuming forces of great minds.²⁶ Davenant said that nowhere were actions presented as effectively as in the English drama. For this reason he believed that this dramatic structure be used for epic purposes. He even divided the epic into five acts.²⁷ Over all this must be the author's "wit," which he defined as a new and unusual revelation of truth.²⁸

The greatest critic of England in the seventeenth century was John Dryden. He thought that Aristotle's

²⁶ J. E. Spingarn, Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century, pp. 9-14.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

²⁸ Ibid.

conclusion about the relative greatness of tragedy and epic should be reversed and that the epic should be given the position of highest importance: "A heroick poem, truly such, is undoubtedly the greatest work which the soul of man is capable to perform."²⁹ He accepted the classical unity of plot but rejected the unity of time. He stressed the importance of many episodes to accompany and carry on the main theme of the epic. He thought that the poem should be didactic and said that the epic here should be noble and virtuous although he need not be a perfect example of virtue like Aeneas.³⁰ From these observations it is clear that Dryden had very little that was new to add to the theory of the epic. His importance lies in the fact that he was often referred to and quoted.

English critics from Dryden to the middle of the eighteenth century agreed generally upon the definition of the epic as a unified poem, solemn in tone, about a great event, which was usually taken from fable. The poem, designed allegorically, was supposed to teach a moral lesson. After 1750 this definition of a highly specialized nature began to break down until even the romance and novel were included.³¹

²⁹ John Dryden, Critical and Miscellaneous Prose Works, III, 425.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 425-435.

³¹ Swedenberg, op. cit., p. 156.

When Henry Fielding published Joseph Andrews in 1742, he was convinced that he was introducing a new literary form into English literature. In his preface to Joseph Andrews, where he explained his purpose in writing the book, he called it a comic prose epic, which he had modeled after Homer. With reference to verse he had this to say about his writing:

For though it want one particular, which the critic enumerates in the constituent parts of an epic poem, namely, metre, yet, when any kind of writing contains all the other parts, such as fable, action, characters, sentiment, and diction, and is deficient in metre only, it seems, I think reasonable to refer it to the epic; at least as no critic hath thought proper to range it under any other head, or to assign it a particular name to itself. 32

Although this discussion of the epic has been confined to only a few of the most prominent critics, it is evident that the subject of epic theory constitutes an important aspect of literary criticism. It has been shown that although the critics are seldom in complete agreement, there are general qualities which all the critics associate with the epic. It is from those general characteristics and from studying the great epics of the past that modern critics derive their definition of the epic.

Writing in 1935, Clayton Hamilton gave this broad summary of the epic:

32
Henry Fielding, Works, I, 18.

The great epics of the world. . . have attained their chief significance from the fact that they have summed up within themselves the entire contribution to human progress of a certain race, a certain nation, a certain organized religion. . . . The great epics have attained this resumptive and historical significance only by exhibiting as subject matter a vast and communal struggle, in which an entire race, an entire organized religion has been concerned,--a struggle imagined as so vast that it has shaken heaven as well as earth and called to conflict not only men but also gods. The epic has dealt always with a struggle, at once human and divine, to establish a great communal cause. This cause, in the Aeneid, is the founding of Rome; in the Jerusalem Liberated it is the recovery of the Holy Sepulchre; in the Faerie Queene it is the triumph of the virtues over the vices; in the Lusiads it is the discovery and conquest of the Indies; in the Divine Comedy it is the salvation of the human soul. . . . As a result of this, the characters in the great epics are memorable because of the part they play in advancing or retarding the victory of the vast and social cause which is the subject of the story. Their virtues and their faults are communal and representative: they are not adjudged as individuals, apart from the conflict in which they figure; and, as a consequence, they are rarely interesting in their individual traits. . . . Because the epic authors have been interested always in communal conflict rather than in individual personality, they have seldom made any use of the element of love,--the most intimate and personal of all emotions. 33

Consideration of a few more modern definitions may help us formulate a definition of the epic which can be applied to Moby-Dick. For Macneile Dixon the epic is "a narrative poem, organic in structure, dealing with great actions and great characters, in a style commensurate with the lordliness of its theme, which tends to idealize these

33
Clayton Hamilton, A Manual of the Art of Fiction, pp. 160-162.

characters and actions, and to sustain and embellish its subject by means of episode and amplification."³⁴

C. M. Gayley gave this definition:

The epic in general, ancient and modern, may be described as a dispassionate recital in dignified rhythmic narrative of a momentous theme or action fulfilled by heroic characters and supernatural agencies under the control of a sovereign destiny. The theme involves the political or religious interests of a people or of mankind; it commands the respect due to popular tradition or to popular ideals. The poem awakens the sense of the mysterious, the awful, and the sublime; through perilous crises it uplifts and calms the strife of frail humanity. ³⁵

The epic, then, can be defined as a long narrative poem, the theme of which is so mighty in its scope that it reaches far beyond the affairs of mere individuals to things concerning an entire people, nation, or even the world as a whole. Its subject matter is taken from history, religion, legend, or mythology. The supernatural element is usually very pronounced, events being often under its control. The action is always on a huge scale, and the characters are mighty heroes, demigods, demons, or celestial beings. Events center in a prodigious effort or struggle to carry out some great and just purpose against opposing forces, which are destined to be overthrown in the end. In the great epic

³⁴
Dixon, op. cit., p. 24.

³⁵
C. M. Gayley and B. P. Kurtz, Methods and Materials of Literary Criticism, p. 424.

deep elemental passions are set forth, such as hate, revenge, jealousy, ambition, and love of power or glory. . . .

~~It is not a love story, though love may be present.~~

The writers of the classical epics developed certain devices which subsequent poets adopted. Some of these characteristic devices are the beginning in medias res, the invocation of the muse, and the statement of the epic purpose. Other conventions include descriptions of warfare and battles, distinctly formal speeches by the characters, epic catalogues and descriptions, which are often quite detailed, and the use of the Homeric simile. The whole story is told in dignified and majestic language. ³⁶

Chapter V is an examination of Moby-Dick in relation to this definition of the epic.

³⁶
W. F. Thrall and A. Hibberd, A Handbook to Literature, p. 155.

CHAPTER V

MOBY-DICK AS EPIC

The phrase "long narrative poem" in our definition of the epic would indicate that Moby-Dick has failed to meet the first requirement of the epic because it is obviously not a poem. It is true that Aristotle thought that an epic not written in the heroic or hexameter measure would be incongruous, but in the past even verse has been rejected as a requirement.¹ And, too, as far as construction is concerned, "no technical distinction is possible between the narrative that is written in verse and the narrative that is written in prose."²

But there have been attempts to prove that the language of Moby-Dick is poetry. Lewis Mumford pointed out that "typographically, Moby-Dick conforms to prose, and there are long passages, whole chapters, which are wholly in the mood of prose; but in spirit and in actual rhythm, Moby-Dick again and again rises to polyphonic verse It can either be considered as broken blank verse, or as cadenced prose."³ Mumford

¹ Swedenberg, op. cit., p. 156.

² Hamilton, op. cit., p. 158.

³ Mumford, op. cit., p. 181.

thought that Melville was unconsciously following Poe's theory that all true poetry must be short in length because a poetic mood cannot be retained over long passages. Melville sustained the poetic mood by dropping into prose during the long intervals between the emotional crises which he presented in poetry. Mumford concluded, "His prose is prose: hard, sinewy, compact; and his poetry is poetry, vivid, surging, volcanic, creating its own form in the very pattern of the emotional state itself, soaring, towering, losing all respect for the smaller conventions of veracity, when the inner triumph itself must be announced."⁴

Padriac Celum also thought that the language of Moby-Dick approached poetry. He listed this passage from Chapter LXXXI as an example of polyphonic prose:

It was a terrific, most pitiable, and maddening sight. The whale was now going head out and sending his spout before him in a continual tormented jet; while his one poor fin beat his side in an agony of fright. Now to this hand, now to that, he yawned in his faltering flight, and still at every billow that he broke, he spasmodically sank in the sea, or sideways rolled toward the sky his one beating fin.

In this passage Melville has used rhythm, repetition of sounds (sight, fright, flight, out, spout), and alliteration (he spasmodically sank in the sea, or sideways rolled toward the sky)--all poetic devices.

⁴
Ibid., pp. 181-182.

Padriac Colum mentioned another passage where the assonance of polyphonic prose strikes the reader's ear. It is from Chapter LXX:

Where unrecorded names and navies rust, and untold hopes and anchors rot; where in her murderous hold this frigate earth is ballasted with bones of millions of the drowned; there in that awful water-land, there was thy most familiar home. Thou has been where bell or diver never went; has slept by many a sailor's side, where sleepless mothers would give their lives to lay them down.

He pointed to the footnote in Chapter XLIII as an example of free verse. It begins

I remember the first albatross I ever saw. It was during a prolonged gale, in waters hard upon the Antarctic seas. From my forenoon watch below, I ascended to the overclouded deck; and there, dashed upon the main hatches, I saw a regal, feathery thing of unspotted whiteness, and with a hooked, Roman bill subline. ⁵

Yver Winters thought that Moby-Dick is "essentially a poetic performance," ⁶ for he had this to say about the language:

The prose of Moby-Dick, though mechanically it is prose and not verse--except for those passages where it occasionally falls fragmentarily into iambic pentameter--is by virtue of its elaborate rhythms and heightened rhetoric closer in its aesthetic result to the poetry of Paradise Lost than to the prose of Mrs. Wharton. The instrument, as an invention, and even when we are familiar with the great prose of the seventeenth century as its background, is essentially as original and powerful an invention as the blank verse of Milton.⁷

⁵ Colum, op. cit., pp. 177-178.

⁶ Winters, op. cit., p. 220.

⁷ Ibid., p. 219.

Whether the language is prose or poetry, there is about it a quality of majesty and simplicity that is epic in character. In his critical study of Melville, Richard Chase spoke of "Melville's epic style."⁸ And, indeed, it is such a highly distinctive and individualized expression that the critics speak of it as Melvillean language in the same exclusive sense that they speak of Virgilean or Miltonic language. Newton Arvin looked upon the language as "a creation, verbally speaking; a great artifice, a particular characterizing idiom; without it the book would not exist."⁹ Arvin pointed out certain "signature" words that Melville liked to use again and again: wild, wildly, wildness, moody, moediness, mystic, mystical, subtle, subtly, subtlety, wondrous, nameless, intense, and malicious. He also mentioned certain characteristic kinds of words and words that were either of Melville's own coinage or at least of a great rarity.¹⁰ Since the epic deals with a whole nation or race of people, it is characteristic of the epic poet to dip into the nation's past to incorporate rare and obsolete words into his poem to give it a historical breadth.

⁸ Chase, op. cit., p. 94.

⁹ Arvin, op. cit., p. 162.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 162-163.

"Since old words add dignity to the poem, the epic poet, following the example of Virgil, may revive certain old usages for this purpose."¹¹

Many of Melville's words and usages appear strange to the reader because they come from the vocabularies of seamen and life in the southern Pacific, and also some of them are forgotten Americanisms or revivals of Elizabethan and seventeenth-century English terms. Some examples found in Moby-Dick are crescentic, earthman, nipper, omnitooled, quoggy, seethe, skrimshander, slebgellion, soul-boats,
12
squilgee, waifed, whale-trover.

Melville's use of the stately "thee" and "thou" adds dignity and formality to the speech of the characters and gives an epic flavor to the language. And the many long formalized speeches of the characters, such as the soliloquies mentioned in Chapter III, add to the epic character of the book as a whole.

One unmistakable epic quality of Melville's language is his frequent use of the Homeric simile. Melville uses this elaborate kind of simile in the same manner that Homer does. The Homeric simile is not an ornament. For Homer,

¹¹
Hall, op. cit., p. 115.

¹²
James Purcess, "Melville's Contribution to English," Publications of the Modern Language Association, LVI (September, 1941), 797-808.

it serves to introduce something which he desires to render exceptionally impressive, some moment of intense action or some sight or sound full of wonder, terror, or pity. Homer wishes to prepare the reader by first describing something similar, only more familiar, which he feels he can make us see clearly.¹³

In Father Maple's sermon occurs one of the first of these elaborate similes:

Like one who after a night of drunken revelry hies to his bed, still reeling, but with conscience yet pricking him, as the plungings of the Roman race-horse but so much the more strike his steel tags into him; as one who in that miserable plight still turns and turns in giddy anguish, praying God for annihilation until the fit be passed; and at last amid the whirl of woe he feels, a deep stupor steals over him, as over the man who bleeds to death, for conscience is the wound, and there's naught to staunch it; so, after sore wrestlings in his berth, Jonah's prodigy of ponderous misery drags him drowning down to sleep.¹⁴

Melville uses a Homeric simile to describe the movement of a crippled whale:

As an overladen Indiaman bearing down the Hindostan coast with a deck of frightened horses, careens, buries, rolls, and wallows on her way; so did this old whale heave his aged bulk, and now and then partly turning over on his cumbrous ribs, expose the cause of his devious wake in the unnatural stump of his starboard fin.¹⁵

¹³ R. C. Jebb, Homer, pp. 26-27.

¹⁴ Moby-Dick, p. 44.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 350.

In a simile reminiscent of Homer, Melville says that the seamen rushed to the yard-arms "as in swarming-time the bees rush to the bows."¹⁶ Homer frequently employs similes to describe the movement of troops, and in one simile Melville compares whales to marching armies.

As marching armies approaching an unfriendly defile in the mountains, accelerate their march, all eagerness to place that perilous passage in their rear, and once more expand in comparative security upon the plain; even so did this vast fleet of whales now seem hurrying forward through the straits; gradually contracting the wings of their semicircle, and swimming on, in one solid, but still crescentic centre. 17

Another figure of speech, more basic and primitive than the Homeric simile, that can be found in Moby-Dick is alliteration, a characteristic of the epic-like Norse sagas, which Melville was familiar with. The repetition of syllables in this passage, which is also a Homeric simile, is striking:

As morning mowers, who side by side slowly and seethingly advance their scythes through the long wet grass of marshy meeds; even so these monsters swam, making a strange, grassy cutting sound; and leaving behind them endless swaths of blue upon the yellow sea.18

The theme of the epic is so mighty in its scope that it reaches far beyond the affairs of mere individuals to things concerning an entire people, nation, or even the world as a

16
Ibid., p. 275.

17
Ibid., p. 380.

18
Ibid., p. 272.

whole. This definition of the epic theme conforms to the seriousness and magnitude which Aristotle required of the tragic action in his definition of tragedy. By seriousness Aristotle meant that the tragedy must deal with problems that are of serious significance to humanity, and by magnitude Aristotle meant that the action must have consequences that transcend the affairs of one man. Superficially, Moby-Dick is the story of the pursuit of the White Whale by a handful of men aboard the Pequod. But symbolically, it becomes an allegory of the destiny of the world with an attempt to explain the nature of Good and Evil, and the dangers of such powerful forces as wrath and vengeance, themes basic and vast enough in scope to be of serious significance to humanity. The action of Moby-Dick has magnitude because Ahab's fall also involves the fall of his crew, which Melville has designed to represent all mankind.

Briefly, the theme of Moby-Dick is the wrath of Ahab just as the theme of the Iliad is the wrath of Achilles. The effect of the wrong done to Ahab by Moby-Dick is similar to the effect of the wrong which Agamemnon does to Achilles. Just as Achilles' hurt pride and desire for revenge lead to the death of Patroclus, so Ahab's pride and determination for revenge lead to the destruction of his crew.

Melville has this to say about the wrath of Ahab:

Small reason was there to doubt, then, that ever since that almost fatal encounter, Ahab had cherished a wild vindictiveness against the whale, all the more fell for that in his frantic morbidness he at last came to identify with him, not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperation. The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung. That intangible malignity which has been from the beginning; to whose dominion even the modern Christians ascribe one half of the worlds; which the ancient Ophites of the east revered in their statue devil;--Ahab did not fall down and worship it like them; but deliriously transferring its idea to the abhorred White Whale, he pitted himself, all mutilated, against it. All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it. 19

The theme of Moby-Dick might be expressed as the arch-individualism of Ahab, his determination to assert his will in defiance of all established order. Then we might draw analogies in the character of Ahab to another epic hero, Milton's arch-rebel of Paradise Lost.

The subject matter of the epic is taken from history, religion, or mythology. Melville used many second-hand sources for the information he used in Moby-Dick. He borrowed rather heavily from four: the Rev. Henry T. Cheever's The Whale and His Captors, Thomas Beale's Natural History of

the Sperm Whale, William Scoresby's Journal of a Voyage to the Northern Whale Fishery, and J. Ross Browne's Etchings of a Whaling Cruise. Although these books and his own experiences served as the actual sources for Moby-Dick, Melville drew his subject matter from what might be called an American myth. Moby-Dick is the fictive embodiment of the myth which Melville's culture had given him, and in this respect it is similar to the Iliad and the Odyssey, which constitute a sort of culmination of the culture of the Achaeans. Virgil wrote his Aeneid with an eye to preserving the myth of the founding of Rome for the Romans.

Melville had read J. N. Reynolds's article "Mocha Dick: or The White Whale of the Pacific" in The Knickerbocker and had undoubtedly been impressed with Reynolds' statement about the strong national character of whaling. In this article Reynolds complained because so little was known about the romantic and colorful sperm whale fishing industry.

The varied records of the commercial world can furnish no precedent, can present no comparison to the intrepidity, skill, and fortitude, which seem the peculiar prerogatives of this branch of our marine. These characteristics are not the growth of a forced exertion; they are incompatible with it. They are the natural result of the ardor of a free people, of a spirit of 20 fearless independence generated by free institutions.

Melville must have seen in the whaling industry a symbol of America in the days of the frontier. The setting-out in search of the whale into perilous and unknown seas offers a striking parallel to the exploration of the American frontier. The crews that manned the ships leaving Nantucket, made up of immigrants from all over the world, helped confirm Whitman's view of America as the melting pot of nations. The quest for the whale as a vital product was similar to the search for buffalo on the plains of the frontier. The life that Melville was writing about in its youthful and primitive existence was a life designed for epic treatment.

Newton Arvin said that the life pictured in *Moby-Dick* was:

a life in some of its aspects reminiscent of that led by the Achaean peoples in the days of their folk-wanderings or by the Germanic peoples in the days of theirs; the whole of American life at the time, with all its differences, was something like that. European migrants, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, had reverted in the Western world to a state of things that had much in common with an archaic, a "heroic" age. Here there had reappeared, as in the Bronze Age and the Age of Vikings, a population of brawlers, boasters, and bullies, as well as of proud, touchy, self-reliant, heroic individuals; and among them there had reappeared a habit of story-telling, of recitation and legendary reminiscence, shot through with a love of the grandiose and never wholly free from an undercurrent of superstitious fear--fear of the hostile and mysterious powers in savage nature, in forests and seas, in wild animals. The life of trappers, hunters, and frontiersmen was of that sort, and the life of whalers equally so. 21

Yvor Winters also stressed the nationalistic flavor of

Moby-Dick:

It is easy to exaggerate the importance of nationalism in literature, but in this particular case, the nationalism is the historical element, and not to perceive it is to fail to understand the very subject of the book. In its physical events, Moby-Dick is a narration of exploration and heroic adventure; it is thus typical of the United States of the nineteenth century, by land as well as by sea. 22

These observations bring us close to the most epic-like quality of Moby-Dick, the fictive embodiment of a whole age. Melville was creating from the myth of America a work of art with universal application.

In the epic the supernatural element is usually very pronounced, events often being under its control. Although it is not as prominent as in earlier epics of more primitive societies, the supernatural element plays a large part in Moby-Dick. The forces of nature take on a primordial and exaggerated significance. The destinies of Ahab and his crew are constantly in the hands of such forces as the sea, both preserver and destroyer of life, and the land, which is both safety and peril. Melville calls the wind by its Greek name, Euroclydon, and speaks of the sun as "a royal czar and king." Indeed these forces are so animate and vital that they are practically deities. 23

22
Winters, op. cit., p. 220.

23
Arvin, op. cit., p. 184.

There are many incidents in Moby-Dick that are not naturally explained. Ahab's scar is never adequately explained nor is the appearance of his mysterious Oriental crew. Fedallah is hardly pictured as a natural being. There are also some actions which are given a natural explanation but which happen too simultaneously to be credible. Examples are the series of events which announce the approach of Moby-Dick; the appearance of the corpses on the yardarms, the turning of the compasses, the breaking of the log and line, the sinking of the life-buoy, and the drowning of a sailor.

Ahab practices black magic when he baptizes the harpoon in human blood in order to make it do his bidding. The moving scene in which Ahab addresses the corpses is filled with the supernatural.

In the discussion of the epic in Chapter IV it was seen that many critics felt that the supernatural element in the epic should be reduced in favor of more realism. It will be recalled that Aristotle favored for both the epic and the drama "probable impossibilities to improbable possibilities." Although there is about Moby-Dick an air of the fabulous, there is a feeling of verisimilitude. It is interesting to note that a few days before the publication of Moby-Dick in the United States an accident happened that lent credence to the story of Moby-Dick sinking the Pequod. On August 20, 1851, in mid-Pacific a huge whale rammed and sunk the Ann Alexander of New Bedford.

In the epic the characters are mighty heroes who are rarely interesting in themselves. They are interesting as symbols of the virtues and shortcomings of a whole nation or race. This is true of Moby-Dick, where little attention is paid to individual characters. The very names--Ahab, Ishmael, and Elijah--rule out individual characters. An exception to this might be the character of Ahab. It has been pointed out that Ahab is more ideally suited to be the hero of a tragedy than of an epic. It is true that Ahab is not the perfect hero that Odysseus, Aeneas, Beowulf, or The Red Cross Knight are. But Ahab bears a close resemblance to Achilles. Achilles has a tragic fault just as Ahab does; in fact the tragic fault is the same in both. But it is not impossible to consider Ahab as a symbol representing the rebellious, indomitable spirit of America.

The minor characters in Moby-Dick are representative of certain characteristics. It has been pointed out that the whole crew is symbolic of mankind in general. Queequeg represents brotherly love in a primordial state, and Fedallah is a symbol of Evil. The three mates, Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask, all represent three different aspects of human personality. Starbuck, the most intelligent of the three, is presented as a prudent, conscientious, and imaginative man of Quaker descent. He is wiser than the others, but he, too, is not free from superstition. He says that he would rather have seen Moby-Dick than the giant white squid, which he

regards as an evil omen. Since Starbuck is a man of faith, he sees that Ahab's revenge will result in tragedy. He alone of the crew pleads with Ahab to turn back: "'Oh! Ahab," cried Starbuck, "not too late is it, even now, the third day to desist. See! Moby Dick seeks thee not. It is thou, thou, that madly seekest him!"²⁴

Stubb is a different sort of man; he represents the matter-of-fact, devil-may-care attitude. Although Stubb is not wholly oblivious to what is going on around him, he has adopted a philosophy of non-violence and non-interference. He offers this description of himself:

I guess he's got what some folks ashore call a conscience; it's a kind of Tic-Dolly-row they say--worse nor a tooth-ache. Well, well; I don't know what it is, but the Lord keep me from catching it Damn me, it's worth a fellow's while to be born into the world, if only to fall right asleep. And now that I think of it, that's about the first thing babies do, and that's a sort of queer, too. Damn me but all things are queer, come to think of 'em. But that's against my principles. Think not, is my eleventh commandment; and sleep when you can, is my twelfth--So here goes again. 25

Flask, the third mate, is the least sympathetic of the three. He is a happy, ignorant, materialistic sort who is "a little waggish in the matter of whales."²⁶

In the epic events center in a prodigious effort or struggle to carry out some great and just purpose against opposing

²⁴
Moby-Dick, p. 561.

²⁵
Ibid., p. 125.

²⁶
Ibid., p. 116.

forces, which are destined to be overthrown in the end. In Moby-Dick the action is centered around the pursuit of Moby-Dick. To Ahab, this is a great and just cause, for he thinks that in killing the whale he will rid the world of all Evil. Moby-Dick is, however, not destined to be overcome in the end. In fact, a complete reversal of the action takes place and Ahab and the Pegued are destroyed. Some critics have felt that Moby-Dick is not an epic because it ends tragically. It is true that in most epics the struggle of the hero ends victoriously; however, the Iliad and Paradise Lost are exceptions.

In the great epics deep elemental passions are set forth, such as hate, revenge, jealousy, ambition, and love of power or glory. Ahab's pride, his hatred for Moby-Dick, his desire for revenge, the fear incited in the crew by Moby-Dick--all these emotions in Moby-Dick are presented as elemental in nature. The most personal of all emotions, love, is seldom portrayed in the epic. Love is absent from Moby-Dick both because there is no woman aboard the Pegued and because love is an emotion alien to the action of the story. It is interesting to note that Starbuck calls upon Ahab to give up the chase in the name of the love Ahab bears for his wife and child, but the plea is ineffectual.

The authors of the classical epics developed certain stylistic devices which subsequent writers of epics have made use of. Some of these can be found in Moby-Dick.

Concerning the plot of the epic, Horace said that the action should start in medias res. Although Moby-Dick does not begin in medias res, which is a mere formal device like the invocation of the muse and the statement of the epic purpose, its plot is characteristic of the epic. The line of the action in the book is straight forward, but the movement is deliberately slow and impeded. Unlike drama, the movement is not swift from climax to climax. Dramatic structure is direct and concentrated, but the structure of Moby-Dick is rambling and loose. The passages of sheer exposition and description of whales and whaling, which retard the narrative, serve a definite purpose. They are like the moments of deliberate quietness and dullness in all very long poems that provide for a change of key. They also add dignity and mass to the book.

These long passages have another purpose. One characteristic of the epic is the detailed description of warfare and battle. Melville's description of whaling is reminiscent of Homer's elaborate details of battle. Melville delights as much in describing the whaler's harpoon as Homer does in describing Achilles' shield. Newton Arvin said that

It is not Bronze Age warfare or hunting that is Melville's subject, as it was Homer's and the others', but it is an industry that had some of the aspects of warfare and certainly of the archaic hunt; and in the loving manner in which Melville lingers over his imagery of lances, harpoons, and cutting-spades, of whale-boats,

whale-lines, and blubber-hooks, of cutting-in and trying-out and stowing-down, there is a shade of feeling that carries one far out of the nineteenth century and recalls again the epic minstrel and the way he lingered over his chariot and ship, and such practical activities as sailing, hunting, plowing, and the performances of the obligatory rites. 27

Another epic device is the use of epic catalogues and lists. The classic example of this device is Homer's catalogues of the ships in the Iliad. Melville also makes use of this device in Moby-Dick, for his classification of the whales in Chapter XXXII falls obviously into the category of a catalogue.

It has been shown that the language of Moby-Dick, whether free verse or polyphonic prose, is sufficiently dignified to serve as the expression of epic material. Also, the theme is mighty and far-reaching enough to be the theme of an epic. The subject matter, like that of many great epics, is taken from the mythical aspect of a nation's culture. The use of the supernatural, an epic quality, is prominent in Moby-Dick. With the exception of Ahab the characters in Moby-Dick, like those in the great epics, are representative of national and universal characteristics. Many epic devices, such as the use of the Homeric simile, descriptions of warfare and battle, and the use of catalogues and lists, are

found in the book. In summary then, the purpose of this chapter has been to show in how many particulars Moby-Dick exemplifies epic theory.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

When Melville wrote to his English publisher, Richard Bentley, to announce that he had almost completed a new book on whaling, he stressed the fact that the book was a great novelty. Since its publication in 1851, critics, recognizing the novelty of Moby-Dick, have tried to classify it. Moby-Dick does not follow the development of the English and European novel, and, as a result, critics have looked to other genres for comparisons. Most often they have turned to examples in tragic and epic literature. The purpose of this study has been to examine both the tragic and epic qualities of Moby-Dick.

Chapter II is a survey of critical opinions which refer to Moby-Dick as an epic. At first, critics favored a tragic interpretation; in 1899 Moby-Dick was called an epic; since that time many critics have interpreted the book in terms of the epic.

Chapter III is a consideration of criticism which interprets Moby-Dick as a tragic drama. For the most part, critics have pointed to the many devices which Melville used and to the character of Ahab as evidence for their interpretation of Moby-Dick as tragedy. Yet structurally Moby-Dick is not

tragedy, for it violates the laws of dramatic concentration. It is in the philosophy of the book, of which the character of Ahab is an indication, that the spirit of tragedy lies.

Chapter IV is a brief historical survey of the theory of the epic. Beginning with Aristotle, epic theory is traced through Italy, France, and England down to modern critics. Chapter IV ends with a definition of the epic.

Chapter V is the application to Moby-Dick of the epic definition developed in the preceding chapter. After an examination of Moby-Dick in terms of language, theme, subject matter, characters, national flavor, use of the supernatural, and use of characteristic epic devices, the thesis is advanced that Melville has written an epic not unlike the great epics of the past, a book that may properly be called an American epic.

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