THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WHITE IN THE LITERATURE
OF THE WESTERN WORLD

APPROVED:

[Signatures]

Major Professor

Minor Professor

Director of the Department of English

Dean of the Graduate School
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WHITE IN THE LITERATURE OF THE WESTERN WORLD

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By

Evelyn Hope McMillen
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the mere reading of the word "white" an association is likely to be made with the color, or perhaps with some object which is itself white. It may be that this awareness is so casual as to be unconscious, or subconscious. It has been noted that color arouses various reactions from its observers. Personal preferences in color are as marked as those in music, and for some persons color gives an opportunity for artistic expression and satisfaction not less intense than that of music. "These color reactions are often due to traditional associations which are the heritage of generations." 1 It is the purpose of this thesis to examine some of the literature of the Western world as it uses one color-related element: white, and to suggest whether or not this use of white is significant in that literature.

Since the use of white is found in the earliest written literature, it is reasonable to assume that it had also been used when the literature was orally transmitted, and then

1 Ami Mali Hicks, Color in Action (New York, 1937), p. 5.
found its way naturally into the written material. The Homeric writings use this element in descriptive words and phrases, especially in stereotyped epithets, such as "white-armed Hera (or Andromache, or Nausicaa)," "silver-footed Thetis." In the Iliad, a "white head" and a "snowy beard" indicate veneration for age, and in the funeral celebration for Patroclus, a white sheep was killed, cut in pieces, and scattered on the pyre as a part of that ceremony. Hesiod spoke of Aphrodite, the "foam-born goddess."

In later literature, the use of white is found in all the different genres and in the various periods and schools. In the realm of American fiction, for example, white is prominent in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and is used to a lesser extent in Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative of A. Gordon Pym*. Poetry has made use of white, some periods or schools being more prolific in its use than others. The Elizabethans and the Romantics had abundant color vocabularies, and the element of white is used generously. Drama has also used the element of white, sometimes following the classical traditions in descriptive and symbolic terms, sometimes indicating a psychological significance of more recent times. From Shakespeare to the present, the use of white is a discernible thematic and descriptive factor in literature.
In the study of folklore, we are told: "... the color cliche' of literature is well established in folk forms like the ballad and the folktale." Descriptive terms such as "skin white as milk (or ivory, or snow)," are a recognizable part of the literature. In the folklore of various Indian tribes in the United States, specifically the Pueblo Indians in the Southwest and the Cherokee Indians of the Midwest, color symbolism is quite important and has been highly systematized. The Pueblos have given each of the six directions a color, using white as the color for the east. The Cherokees also use white as a directional color, but use it to indicate the south. The Cherokees also give abstract qualities to the colors. White suggests happiness. The Cherokee places of refuge were called white towns, "peaceful islands in time of trouble."3

In adding the suggestion of symbolism to that of color itself, the remark by J. E. Cirlot is pertinent: "... Colour symbolism is one of the most universal of all types of symbolism, and has been consciously used in the liturgy, in heraldry, alchemy, art and literature." He adds that colour symbolism usually comes from one of these sources: "(1) the

3Ibid.
inherent characteristic of each colour, perceived intuitively as objective fact; (2) the relationship between a colour and the planetary symbol traditionally linked with it; or (3) the relationship which elementary, primitive logic perceives. 

Of interest to this study is Cirlot's further comment on the positive and negative concepts of color:

The conception of black and white as diametrically opposed symbols of the positive and the negative, either in simultaneous, in successive or alternating opposition, is very common. In our opinion it is of the utmost importance. Like all dual formulae in symbolism, it is related to the number two and the great myth of the Gemini... white... represents timelessness and ecstasy. (The function of white is derived from that of the sun: from mystic illumination--symbolically of the East; when it is regarded as purified yellow) (that is when it stands in the same relation to yellow as does black to the blue of the deep sea), it comes to signify intuition in general, and, in its affirmative and spiritual aspect, intuition of the Beyond. That is why the sacred horses of Greek, Roman, Celtic and Germanic cultures were white.

It can be seen from these observations that white is significant as more than a color. For our purposes the term "element" has been chosen, rather than the term "color."

This will be developed in the succeeding chapters, but an awareness of the difference may be illustrated with the following poem:

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5 Ibid., pp. 54, 55.
What heart could have thought you?--
Past our devisal
(0 filigree petal!)
Fashioned so purely,
Fragilely, surely,
From what Paradisal
Imagineless metal,
Too costly for cast?
Who hammered you, wrought you
From argentive vapour?--
"God was my shaper,
Passing surmisal,
He hammered, he wrought me,
From curled silver vapour,
To lust of His mind:--
Thou could'st not have thought me!
So purely, so palely,
Tinily, surely,
Mightily, frailly,
Insculped and embossed,
With his hammer of wind,
And His graver of frost.6

Nowhere in the poem is the word "white" used, yet the words
snowflake (in the title), argentine, silver, purely, palely
and frost, all contain the "element" of white; thus this
designation seems more definitive.

This brings to attention the wide use of synonyms in
literature. Among the synonyms used for white are: snowy,
ashen, lily, chalky, paper-white, swanlike, milky, frosty,
hoary. A further list is included in the Appendix. Other
words which have a more abstract application are: pale,
pallid, wan, faded, ghastly, ghostly, waxen. This list is
also expanded in the Appendix.

6Francis Thompson, "To a Snowflake," English Poets:
Chapter II will be concerned with the use of white as a color-related element, as seen in descriptive writing, in literary conventions, and in some root words and derivatives.

Chapter III will explore the use of white as a symbolic element. This will be approached by its use as a positive force: radiance, purity, goodness, joy and so forth; and as a negative force: terror, panic, death, mourning and others.

Chapter IV will examine some of the psychological implications of white. These will include the association of white with the supernatural, a consideration of the idea of life-in-death, and the suggestion that "The White Goddess," the Moon, is a vital element in Western literature.

The last chapter will enlarge upon the conclusion that white is a significant element in the literature of the Western world.
CHAPTER II

THE USE OF WHITE AS A COLOR-RELATED ELEMENT

In the introduction it was suggested that any listing of white would likely bring to mind an association with color. In this connection, then, it might be helpful to examine briefly the general use of color in literature. Several interesting studies have been made, although none of them is exhaustive, and rather surprisingly, none has been made very recently. The first study to be noted here was that made by the Right Honorable W. E. Gladstone in 1877.¹ Gladstone's study revealed that some German philologists and physiologists had concluded from their study of the matter of color in literature that color was used comparatively little by the ancients, and that a sensitivity to it has been developed gradually, "until it has now become a familiar and unquestioned part of our inheritance." Mr. Gladstone also discussed this subject with "an able Hebraist" and found much the same evidence of the imperfect conception of color

in the Old Testament scriptures. In the study Die Entwicklung
des Farben by Dr. Hugo Magnus, Mr. Gladstone found:

. . . . The starting point is, an absolute blindness to colour in the primitive man. Anaxagoras, it seems, believed that in the earliest times there was no sense of colour at all. The first stage attained is that at which the eye becomes able to distinguish between red and black. Red comes first . . . because it is the most luminous of the colours; but, in the Rigveda white and red are hardly severed. Greek philosophers, Aristotle in particular, lean to treating colours chiefly as degrees of the luminous and non-luminous, or as mixtures, atomistic or otherwise, of black and white.2

Almost twenty years later, Havelock Ellis made a somewhat similar study in which he found that in early literature the color-vocabulary was "extremely defective." He also felt that color preferences were probably discernible among different races, and at different periods, even as they are among individuals. Mr. Ellis says, "I have not been able to show that any one colour dominates imaginative literature from first to last." He did find, however, that in the "historical evolution of the colours: white is fairly constant;" in a conclusion similar to that in Mr. Gladstone's study, Mr. Ellis found that "the aesthetic vision of the Greeks included black, white, red and yellow, and that at the time of his writing (1896), in so remote a country as Brazil, it was found that only these same colours possessed

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2Ibid., p. 369.
distinct words among every tribe, though all tribes were able
to distinguish blue and green."³ This would indicate that
not all colors, at least not specific terms designating them,
were available in the vocabularies of primitive peoples.

The most specific study of color found was made in 1898
by Alice Edwards Pratt, The Use of Color in the Verse of
English Romantic Poets from Langland to Keats.⁴ She found,
as did Gladstone and Ellis, that "in the works of the majority
of poets light and shade are found to play a larger part than
defined hues."⁵ She cited Milton's Paradise Lost III, 1-6
as an example of this use:

Hail holy light, offspring [sic] of Heav'n first-born
Or of th' Eternal Coeternal beam
May I express thee unblam'd? since God is light,
And never but in unapproached light
Dwelt from Eternitie, dwelt then in thee,
Bright effluence of bright essence increate.

In each of the above studies it was noted that color
distinctions were made largely in the areas of light as
opposed to dark, or brightness as opposed to darkness, and
Gladstone says that Homer "operated, in the main, upon a

³Havelock Ellis, "The Colour-Sense in Literature,"
The Contemporary Review, LXIX (January-June, 1896), 714-729.

⁴Alice Edwards Pratt, The Use of Color in the Verse of
English Romantic Poets from Langland to Keats (Chicago, 1898).

⁵Ibid., p. 12.
quantitative scale, with white and black, or light and dark, for its opposite extremities, instead of the qualitative scale opened by the diversities of color."\(^6\)

This evidence makes the significance of white of even greater interest, since its distinction as a color element has been apparent even in early literature. The dictionary definition of white includes the information that it is a quality of lightness, and in this connection its first use in literature would seem to follow logically.

It will be of interest to examine here some of the early literature, to see if the above observations are borne out. In the available portions of Egyptian writings, these expressions are found: "light," "the shining ones," "lord of brightness," "radiance," "god of Light," "Hail thou that shinest and givest light from Hent-she!" From the Book of the Dead, "Transformation into a Lotus," comes this passage:

I am the pure lotus which springeth up from the divine splendor that belongeth to the nostrils of Ra. I have made my way and I follow on seeking for him who is Horus. I am the pure one who cometh forth out of the Field.\(^7\)

These expressions are an indication of the use made of color, and it can be seen that each of them indicates light, or brightness.


\(^7\)Egyptian Literature (author not given) (New York, 1901).
In the first Greek literature, Mr. Gladstone found that:

... although Homer has used light in its various forms for his purposes with perhaps greater splendour and effect than any other poet, yet the colour-adjecitives and colour-descriptions of the Poems were not only imperfect, but highly ambiguous and confused ... I ... found that his system of colour, or rather his "system in lieu of colour," was "founded upon light and upon darkness, its opposite or negative," and that the organ of colour was "but partially developed among the Greeks of his age."^8

Mr. Ellis says that "Homer's colour terminology, and that of the Greeks generally, is very vague ..."^9 In a scanning of the Iliad, the stereotyped epithet "white-armed" is found to refer to Hera, Andromache, and Helen. In the Odyssey, Penelope, and the attendant maidens are also designated "white-armed." Also in the Odyssey, Homer refers to a goose (XV, 161), a sheep (XV, 472), a Leucadian rock (XXIV, 11), using the terms argos and argennos, (white, bright), and he speaks of "white sails," the "white bones of the dead," and designates as white "a wild boar's tusk."

Another Greek writer of interest here is the lyricist Sappho. As might be expected from the lyric nature of Sappho's writings, her use of descriptive color-terms is fuller than the epic work of Homer. She speaks of the


"foam-born," "snowy doves," "waxen lilies," "the dawn-white valley." Some of her descriptive lines are quite vivid:
"Hint of hues, than milk or the snowdrift whiter," "Melting . . . . Like the foam fall of a spended wave," "Whiter thy breast than snow," "White arms that cling, white breast that burns to breast," "Now the silver crescent/Of the moon has vanished."10 Three fuller quotations are too suitable to overlook:

When the moon at full on the sill of heaven
Lights her beacon, flooding the earth with silver,
All the shining stars that about her cluster
Hide their fair faces.11

Once on a time
They say that Leda found
Beneath the thyme
An egg upon the ground;

And yet the swan
She fondled long ago
Was whiter than
Its shell of peeping snow.12

In "The Cretan Dance," the description of the moon is provocative:

As the moon in all her splendor
Slowly rose above the forest,

---

10 John Myers O'Hara, The Poems of Sappho (Portland, 1910).
11 Ibid., p. 6.
12 Ibid., p. 56.
With revering eyes uplifted
To the round and rising planet,
Soon its drifting beams of silver
Lit their faces.

Soft and clear its sphere effulgent,
Full defined above the treetops,
Steeped in pale unearthly glamor
All the landscape.

When the argent glimmer rested
On the altar piled with garlands,
And its glow unveiled the marble
Aphrodite.13

It would be anticipated that Catullus, an early Latin
lyricist well read in Greek poetry, would use a similar number
of descriptive terms. These are some of his expressions and
terms that recall those of Sappho: "white," "Diana" (the
moon), "Alpine passes," "snowy," "milkwhite girls," "silvery
voice," "silver-haired," "snow white feverfew," "blanched
and womanish fingers," "fleecy aether," "white toga of man-
hood."14

Vergil, writing slightly later than Catullus, uses color
with a great deal more "splash" than do the writers who
preceded him. And, while there is a "splendid richness
and variety of his color-effects,"15 he also uses many

13Ibid., p. 59.

14L. R. Lind, editor, Latin Poetry in Verse Translation
(Boston, 1957), pp. 28-52.

15Thomas R. Price, "The Color-System of Vergil," The
expressions and variations of terms related to white. Some of these are albus (white, or dull white, as the albumen of an egg), candidus (shine, glow with heat, as a lily glowing white against dark green leaves), niveus (wash, cleanse—a cold, bluish white, changing with atmospheric conditions), argenteus (shine, glitter, as silver, white with a metallic lustre), lacteus (milk, a soft, creamy white), marmoreus (shine, shimmer, as marble—white, with a lustrous surface), decor (from color, the dull, bleached whiteness of old age), canus (shine, silver-gray), glaucus (bright, as the sea agitated with foam, "crested waves"). In the Aeneid, Vergil tells of Dido's pouring "Libations between the horns of a milk-white heifer" (IV, 61), and, in the chantry of marble which Dido had dedicated to her first husband, she "hung it with snow-white fleece" (IV, 459); Cloanthus, in V, 237, vows to offer "a sleek white bull."

After Vergil, there would seem to be a still wider use of color. It might be well to mention, however, that there was also a great deal more literature produced, so that one might be misled somewhat by an obvious quantitative increase in colorful descriptions.

16 Ibid., p. 10.
Petrarch's ardor, particularly in the face of continued rejection by his lady, is rather difficult for the modern mind to believe, but he has left a wealth of descriptive terms using white. Some of these are "white as ashes," "the colour of death's in both our faces," "That touching pallor, which, like a soft cloud/Veiled her sweet smile. . . .," "0 glove, most dear, most white, most delicate,/The perfect sheath for rose-stained ivory," "That mild angelic mouth were rose-mist glows/Against pearl glimmer . . . .," "The spring returns, the spring wind softly blowing;/Sprinkles the grass with gleam and glitter of showers,/Powdering pearl and diamond . . . .," while the entire sonnet, "Her Lustre Exceeds the Sun," uses white and related words:

The sweet new melancholy song of birds
At daybreak fills the valleys all around
With silver beauty, and the silver sound
Of water in the meadows adds new words.
Aurora, tressed like Jason's golden herds,
Whose forehead with love's constancy is bound,
Combing her consort's frosty head, has found
Me listening to the liquid minor thirds.
Thus, roused from slumber, I salute the sun;
But that sun chiefest whose melodious light
Dazzled my youth and dazzles still my sight.
I have watched both suns rise up as one--
This killing the cold radiance of the night,
That clouding this in bright oblivion.17

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M. Gerard Davis has noticed particularly the color in the poetry of Pierre de Ronsard, a French poet of the Renaissance who followed closely both Petrarch and the Greek and Latin epic and lyric poets. Mr. Davis says that Ronsard "has an eye for the range and variation of whiteness." The difference between the white of things and the white of flesh tints is clearly marked by appropriate metaphor. The dead white of snow is rendered by the simile of spilled flour: "le Ciel pesle-mesle/Enfarina les champs de neiges et de gresle." And he uses the fall of snow to suggest whitening hair: "Et sème bien espais des neiges sur sa teste." He uses a variety of metaphors to suggest the whiteness of flesh: milk, curds, ivory, marble, white agate, alabaster, mother of pearl, lilies, swans, pearls. Many of Ronsard's uses are in the Petrarchian tradition.¹⁸

Turning now to English literature, this study will note first the work of Chaucer. Pratt says that white is among the four colors Chaucer used most frequently, and that in his use of color, Chaucer was a portrait-painter. He used these terms to "paint" his characters' complexions: ashen, ivory, pale, pallid, snowy, wan, white.¹⁹ In the "Man of Law's


¹⁹Pratt, The Use of Color, pp. 5, 6.
Tale," Chaucer says, "Pale Constance rose in sorrow, for the
glow/Of color left her cheek as she prepared her." Suggest-
ging the guilt of Hermengild's murderer, Chaucer writes:

Have you not some time seen a paler face
Among the crowd, of one that has been led
Towards his death, having obtained no grace,
With such a colour in his face, so dead,
Among all other faces in that rout?20

Chaucer had other expressions for white also: bleached,
hoar, silver, paper-white, snow-white.

Spenser, too used white to "paint a picture," although
(as here) usually also symbolically:

A lovely Ladie rode him faire beside,
Upon a lowly Asse more white than snow,
Yet she much whiter; but the same did hide
Under a vele, that wimpled was full low;
And over all a blacke stole shee did throw:
As one that inly mourned, so was she sad,
And heavy sate upon her palfrey slow;
Seemed in heart some hidden care she had,
And by her, in a line, a milkewhite lambe she lad.

So pure and innocent, as that same lambe,
She was . . .21

Any examination of English literature would at least be
aware of its most outstanding literary figure, William
Shakespeare. Carolyn Spurgeon, commenting on Shakespeare's

20Geoffrey Chaucer, Canterbury Tales, translated by
Nevill Coghill (Baltimore, 1952), p. 156.

21Bernard D. Grebanier and others, English Literature
keen sense of sight, says: "... to deal with this sense at all adequately almost amounts to the same thing as to deal with the man as a whole and his work in its entirety."22 She explains, further, that Shakespeare's interest in color is not primarily in specific colors as such, but as it is seen in some object and because of the emotion which is aroused or conveyed. In fact, she suggests that his use of color-terms is such that it is "... quite unnecessary, for the most part, to mention any specific colour at all."23 That this is true may be shown in the scene in which the traitors "cheeks are paper," as they glance at the documents handed them by their king (Henry V, 2.2.71). Also, with Macbeth, it is possible to sense the horror and fear gripping the servant who, with "linen cheeks" and "whey face," rushes in to report disaster (Macbeth 5.3.16).

This interest in the shifting colour of the face and the emotion it implies is one of the marked features of Shakespeare's earliest poem, and a kind of running colour symphony is there played on the shamed blushes of Adonis (1.76), or his cheeks with "anger ashy-pale," and the flushed hue of Venus (1.35), "red and hot as coals of glowing fire," or with emotion so suddenly white that Adonis believes her dead, and "claps her pale cheek, till clapping makes it red" (1.468).24

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23 Ibid., p. 58.
24 Ibid., p. 59.
The entire sixty-first stanza of "Venus and Adonis" is a harmony of various shades of white, and Shakespeare here made use of Petrarchian images:

A lily prisoned in a gaol of snow,
Or ivory in an alabaster band;
So white a friend engirts so white a foe.

To move the focus of this brief and selective survey from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, another English poet who used white significantly is James Thomson, often considered a forerunner of the Romantic influence. This can be seen in two quotations from "Winter":

... while, rising slow,
Blank in the leaden-colored east, the moon
Wears a wan circle round her blunted horns.
Seen through the turbid, fluctuating air,
The stars obtuse emit a shivering ray;
Or frequent seem to shoot athwart the gloom,
And long behind them trail the whitening blaze.25

Again:

The keener tempests come: and fuming dun
From all the livid east, or piercing north,
Thick clouds ascend---in whose capacious womb
A vapory deluge lies, to snow congealed.
Heavy they roll their fleecy world along;
And the sky saddens with the gathered storm.
Through the hushed air the whitening shower descends,
At first thin wavering; till at last the flakes
Fall broad, and wide, and fast, dimming the day
With a continual flow. The cherished fields
Put on their winter robe of purest white.

25Grebanier, English Literature, p. 19, 1. 123-129.
'Tis brightness all; save where the new snow melts
Along the mazy current . . . .26

The Romantic writers of the nineteenth century are particularly fond of light and color imagery. Looking at the work of Sir Walter Scott, Pratt found that "Scott had a large color-vocabulary and used it lavishly. . . . In wealth of color he equals Shelley. . . . In color-vocabulary he falls little short of Shakespeare."27 As she called Chaucer a portrait-painter, so she has termed Scott a scene-painter, and says that his colors are those of the world of nature, that he liked brilliant or deep hues, broad contrasts, and strong lights and shadows.28 In addition to this use of color in general, a wide use of white and words suggestive of light or brightness is also abundant, as the following figure will illustrate:

26Ibid., p. 20, l. 223-235.  
27Pratt, p. 38.  
28Pratt, pp. 39, 45.
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<thead>
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<th>Object:</th>
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Fig. 1--Terms commonly used for certain objects

Scott's works also abound in descriptive phrases and compounds as "paly gold," "silver-white," "ashy-pale,"
"wan white," "in sheets of whitening foam," "crystal pool,"
"foamy crest," "milk-white steeds," "Tweed's silver current,"
"fleecy cloud," "stringing beads of glistening pearl,"
"moon's pale beam." Here are two fuller examples:

The birch-trees wept in fragrant balm;
The aspens slept beneath the calm;
The silver light, with quivering glance,
Played on the water's still expanse,29

For to her cheek, in feverish flood,
One instant rushed the throbbing blood,
Then ebbing back, with sudden sway,
Left its domain as wan as clay.30

30Ibid., p. 171.
Among the Romantic poets the names of Shelley and Keats are almost always mentioned together. Each contributes richly to the use of white, but only brief mention of some of their work will be made in this chapter. To Shelley, beauty was "a power unseen among us, but felt in all things." \(^{31}\)

Two selections from his poetry will illustrate his sensitive and delicate handling:

The point of one white star is quivering still
Deep in the orange light of widening morn
Beyond the purple mountains; through a chasm
Of wind-divided mist the darker lake
Reflects it; now it wanes; it gleams again
As the waves fade, and as the burning threads
Of woven cloud unravel in pale air;
'Tis lost! and through yon peaks of cloud-like snow
The roseate sunlight quivers. \(^{32}\)

And, in a lighter vein:

The waters are flashing,
The white hail is dashing,
The lightnings are glancing,
The hoar-spray is dancing--
Away! \(^{33}\)

Many more instances of Shelley's use of white could be cited, but only these will be added: "Arethusa arose/From her couch of snows," "The urns of the silent snow," "The Earth's white daughter," "pearled thrones," "Daisies, those pearled Arcturi

\(^{31}\text{Bernard D. N. Grebanier, The Essentials of English Literature, II (New York, 1948), 446.}\)

\(^{32}\text{George Edward Woodberry, editor, Shelley (New York, 1901), pp. 178, 179.}\)

\(^{33}\text{Ibid., p. 405.}\)
of the earth," "moonlight-colored May," "And floating water-
lilies, broad and bright/Which lit the oak that overhung the 
edge/With moonlight beams of their own watery light."

One of the early poems of John Keats was "I Stood Tiptoe 
upon a Little Hill," a charmingly descriptive (though very 
even) poem, which contains these lines: "The clouds were 
pure and white as flocks new shorn," "Here are sweet peas, 
on tip-toe for a flight:/With wings of gentle flush o'er 
delicate white," "Or by the moon lifting her silver rim/ 
Above a cloud, ..." "Walking upon the white clouds 
wreath'd and curl'd." "Endymion," too, has many expressive 
uses of white. Lines 89-100 are typical:

Full in the middle of this pleasantness
There stood a marble altar, with a tress
Of flowers budded newly; and the dew
Had taken fairy phantasies to strew
Daisies upon the sacred sward last eve,
And so the dawned light in pomp receive.
For 'twas the morn: Apollo's upward fire
Made every eastern cloud a silvery pyre
Of brightness so unsullied, that therein
A melancholy spirit well might win
Oblivion, and melt out his essence fine
Into the winds.

Other expressions from "Endymion" pertinent to this study 
include ". . . and valley-lilies whiter still/ Than Leda's 
love," "By thy love's milky brow!" and "To summon all the 
downiest clouds together." Such quotations from the one 
poem "Endymion" could be continued almost indefinitely.
Keats is indeed a rich source for the uses of white descriptively.

Poetic writing has been the area examined thus far in this study of the use of white; it lends itself to vivid and terse sense imagery, and it is ideal for the purpose. However, it will be well to look at some English and American fiction of the Victorian era and later.

The first book selected was *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë. Very few uses of white were found, and most of these were simple statements such as the following: "I . . . arrived . . . just in time to escape the first feathery flakes of a snow shower"; 34 " . . . the whole hill-back was one billowy white ocean"; 35 " . . . a white face scratched and bruised Isabella." 36 These descriptions are few, as might be expected in a book which is so heavily burdened with tormented souls. Even the elements are tormented, and in a wild, dark way which does not include the use of much light or brightness.

A second book examined was *The Egoist* by George Meredith. Three passages of vivid descriptiveness are cited:


35Ibid., p. 35.  

36Ibid., p. 141.
... she turned her face to where the load of virginal blossom, whiter than summer-cloud on the sky, showered and drooped and clustered so thick as to claim colour and seem, like higher Alpine snows in noon-sunlight, a flush of white. From deep to deeper heavens of white, her eyes perched and soared.37

... perfect in height and grace of movement; exquisitely-tressed; red-lipped, the colour striking out to a distance from her ivory skin: a sight to set the woodland dancing... See the silver birch in a breeze... now it gives the glimpse and shine of the white stem's line within, now hurries over it, denying that it was visible, with a chatter along the sweeping folds, while still the white peeps through... she wore a fichu of thin white muslin crossed in front on a dress of the same light stuff, .... These hues of red rose and green and pale green ruffled and pouted in the billowy white of the dress ballooning and valleying softly, like a yacht before the sail bends low;38

... One sprig of it the double-blossom wild cherry-tree, if it had not faded and gone to dust-colour like crusty Alpine snow... 39

Meredith also uses white in a symbolic sense, but that will not be discussed here. Since he is concerned with motivation and inner conflicts, his language is directed more toward the mind than toward the senses.

A third novel examined, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, by Thomas Hardy, a later Victorian, yields these two passages, among others which could have been chosen:

The banded ones were all dressed in white gowns—a gay survival from Old Style days, when cheerfulness and Maytime were synonyms—days before the habit of taking long views had reduced emotion to a monotonous average. Their first exhibition of themselves was in a processional march of two and two around the parish. Ideal and real clashed slightly as the sun lit up their figures against the green hedges and creeper-laced house-fronts: for, though the whole troop wore white garments, no two whites were alike among them. Some gowns were purely blanched; some had a bluish pallor; some worn by the older characters (which had possibly lain by folded for many a year) inclined to a cadaverous tint. . . .

In addition to the distinction of a white frock every woman and girl carried in her right hand a peeled willow wand, and in her left hand a bunch of white flowers . . .

... The atmosphere turned pale; the birds shook themselves in the hedges, arose and twittered; the land showed all its white features, and Tess showed hers, still whiter.41

Among modern English fiction, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* might not be expected to contain anything significant using white, but these descriptive phrases paint easily identifiable pictures:

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The moon had spread over everything a thin layer of silver. . . .

When the sun rose there was a white fog, very warm and clammy, and more blinding than the night. It did not shift or drive; it was just there, standing all around you like something solid. At eight or nine, perhaps it lifted as a shutter lifts. We had a glimpse of the towering multitude of trees, of the immense matted jungle, with the blazing little ball of the sun hanging over it—all perfectly still—and then the white shutter came down again, smoothly, as if sliding in greased grooves.

This fair hair, this pale visage, this pure brow, seemed surrounded by an ashy halo... only her forehead, smooth and white...

Something should be said of American writers. Since James Fenimore Cooper was an essentially pictorial writer, "The Last of the Mohicans" was examined to see what one of Cooper's works would yield. The use of white is negligible; more greens and browns—forest hues—are evident.

The works of Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Edgar Allan Poe are to be examined in Chapters III and IV.

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Some American poets have used white effectively, perhaps Robert Frost more than others. His "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and "Birches" are good examples of the use of white or its synonyms in descriptive settings.

In addition to the use of white in a color-related sense for description only, it has been used in some literary conventions, as has been pointed out. Homer used his stereotyped epithets, "white-armed," "silver-footed." Later writers used such terms as "lily-white," "snow-white," and others to the extent that they, too, have become accepted, stereotyped expressions. Poets of the Renaissance and English sonnet writers adopted Petrarch's style of effusive comparisons of the beauty, cruelty, and charm of his beloved, and the use of white plays an important role here. Perhaps that importance is suggested by the mocking tone in the opening lines of Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130":

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;  
Coral is far more red than her lips' red:  
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

While the English language is rich in expressions literally meaning white, and in synonyms of those expressions, it also employs words which have been derived from Latin roots which expand this usage considerably. The Latin words (except blancus) were given on page fourteen of
this chapter under the discussion of Vergil. Some English words in more or less general use which come from these roots are alb: a white tunic or garment; albacore: a fish (so called from a piece of white flesh that sticks to its heart); albescent and albicant: growing or becoming white; albication: the process of growing white; albino: originally applied by the Portuguese to white negroes on the coast of Africa; albumen: the white of an egg; (related words: albumenize, albumenizer, -ed, -ing); albuminous: having the same composition as the white of an egg; blanch: to make white, whiten; blancmange: a pudding--white, sweet; candescence: dazzling whiteness of brightness; candescent: glowing with, or as with, heat; candid: now means free from bias; fair, impartial; frank, straight-forward; candidacy: position or status of running for office (because in Roman times a candidate for office wore a white toga); candied: preserved or incrusted with sugar (crystallized); niveous: snowy, resembling snow; nivosity: snowiness.45

It has been the purpose of this chapter to indicate the extensive use of white as a color-related element in passages of description in the literature of the Western

world from its beginnings to the present age. In examining various literary materials, it has become quite evident that the use of white has broader applications than that of a color-related element. One of these is its symbolic use. This will be considered in the following chapter.
CHAPTER III

THE USE OF WHITE SYMBOLICALLY

In order to consider the use of white as a symbolic element in literature, some mutual understanding of the term symbol must be established. This is not quite as simple as the dictionary definition of the term might suggest. Webster's dictionary defines a symbol as "something that stands for or represents another thing; especially, an object used to present something abstract; emblem: as, the dove is a symbol of peace, the cross is the symbol of Christianity."¹ When the literary critic defines a symbol, however, there is added meaning. Laurence Perrine says:

A symbol may be roughly defined as something that means more than what it is. . . . Image, metaphor, and symbol shade into each other and are sometimes difficult to distinguish. In general, however, an image means only what it is; a metaphor means something other than what it is; and a symbol means what it is and something more too. . . . The symbol is the richest and at the same time the most difficult of the poetical figures.²


²Laurence Perrine, Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry (New York, 1963), pp. 69, 71.
Arnold Wittick, in his *Symbols, Signs and Their Meaning*, says that the Greek word ἄρωμα, from which the term symbol is derived, appears to have meant a bringing together, and this meaning is the logical antecedent of the present meaning, for "symbolism is the bringing together of ideas and objects, one of which expresses the other. The symbol is either an object that stands for another object, or an object that stands for an idea."³ Wittick cites Ernest Jones as the English writer who has devoted perhaps the most study to the subject of symbolism and psychoanalysis and says that Jones would like to limit the term symbolism to unconscious symbolism (thus limiting it to the realm of psychoanalysis). Jones would prefer the term metaphor for conscious symbolism.

Wittick says:

The distinction between the two classes of symbols is that in general conscious symbolism is employed to enhance the value of what is symbolized, and in unconscious symbolism revealed by psychoanalysis, the symbol comes into existence with the function of concealing the meaning, as a substitute for something repugnant.⁴

This explanation, too, needs modification, for Jones' theory is not the only one extant, since Erich Fromm and others


⁴Ibid., p. 11.
believe that not only undesirable things are revealed by unconscious symbolism, but that it is possible for desirable and pleasant things to be revealed—or discerned.  

Something of the confusion which can arise in the use of the term "symbol" can be seen from the above definitions. To arrive at a working basis for this paper, however, the ideas of Fromm's will be used. He differentiates between three kinds of symbols: the conventional, the accidental and the universal.

The conventional symbol Fromm illustrates with the word "table." There is no intrinsic relationship between the word and the object. Each letter in the word is actually a "symbol" and the combination of letters which form the word "table" has come to be accepted for the object which is so identified. Some words have a closer etymological relationship to the object or the idea expressed than do others, but there is no basic or necessary relationship. The accidental symbol Fromm designates as the association of a place or thing with something which has happened at the place or in connection with the object. (President Kennedy's assassination would be such an accidental symbol—although its application is probably more far-reaching than most accidental symbols.

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would be. There are many people in the world who automatically think of President Kennedy's assassination when the name of the city of Dallas is mentioned. Of course, the "city" could have had nothing to do with the deed, but the association is there—and therefore symbolic—an accidental symbol). The accidental symbol, according to Fromm, will rarely be used in literature, because it must necessarily be too personal to have wide understanding. Fromm's third symbol, the universal symbol, is one in which there is an intrinsic relationship between the symbol and that which it represents. He suggests fire and water as being representative of the universal symbol. "... Many ... universal symbols ... are rooted in the experience of every human being."

Thomas Carlyle used a very similar distinction for symbols, except that he omitted the accidental symbol:

Of Symbols, however, I remark farther, that they have both an extrinsic and in intrinsic value; oftenist the former only. ... Another matter it is, however, when your Symbol has intrinsic meaning, and is of itself fit that men should unite around it. ... Of this latter sort are all true Works of Art: in them (if thou know a Work of Art from a Daub of Artifice) wilt thou discern Eternity looking through Time; the Godlike rendered visible.7

6Fromm, pp. 13-16.

In this chapter on the use of white as a symbolic element, the purpose is to use the idea of the conventional, or extrinsic, symbol. It should be noted, however, that the same object may be used as a conventional symbol or as a universal symbol, depending upon the context in which it appears.

The symbolic use of white may be approached in two general directions. Some uses of white, or white objects (animals, birds, plants), may be viewed as a positive force; other uses would appear to have the opposite effect—a negative force. The examples which follow are chosen as being representative of these symbolic indications of white. They will not, of course, be considered as either exclusive or exhaustive.

The most obvious positive use of white symbolically is to indicate beauty. The dove, the swan, the lily, the moon—all are used in this respect, as the following quotations show:

"Thrice fairer than myself," thus she began,
"The field's chief flower, sweet above compare,
Stain to all nymphs, more lovely than a man,
More white and red than doves or roses are."§

There saw the swan his neck of arched snow,
And oar'd himself along with majesty;
Sparkled his jetty eyes;⁹

Graceful and smooth and still
As the male swan that floats adown the stream,
Or on the waters of the unruffled lake
Anchors her placid beauty.¹⁰

The French Parnassians, who were devoted to form in literature, had the swan as their symbol (not because of its whiteness, but for its beauty and grace; but since the swan is white, it is difficult to isolate the bird completely from its color); it was "an ideal of beauty, a beauty which was above all other things and qualities."¹¹ The symbol of the swan also became identified with the Spanish-American Modernist's search for beauty, and as such is portrayed in Rubén Darío's "El Cisne" ("The Swan").

¡Oh Cisne! ¡Oh sacro pájaro! Si antes la blance Helena del huevo azul de Leda brotó de gracia llena,
siendo de la Hermosura la princesa inmortal,

bajo tus blancas alas la nueva Poesía
concibe en una gloria de luz y de armonía
la Helena eterna y pura que encarna el ideal.¹²

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¹¹The University of Missouri Studies, Swan, Cygnets, and Owl, translations by Mildred E. Johnson (Columbia, Missouri, 1956), p. 9.
¹²Ibid., p. 84.
O Swan! Oh sacred bird! If once white Helen, immortal princess of Beauty's realms, emerged all grace from Leda's sky-blue egg, so now, beneath the white of your wings, the new Poetry, here in a splendor of music and light, conceives the pure, eternal Helen who is the Ideal.\(^{13}\)

The symbol of the swan was chosen for its form, not its whiteness, but color was also important to the Modernists. Their identifying color was blue (azul). However, "not only blue, but all colors are used as a means of communicating impressions."\(^{14}\) Gutiérrez Nájera would seem to have this as his purpose in "De Blanco":

> ¡Qué cosa más blanca que cándido lirio?  
> ¡Qué cosa más pura que místico cirio?  
> ¡Qué cosa más casta que tierno azahar?  
> ¡Qué cosa más virgen que leve neblina?  
> ¡Qué cosa más santa que el ara divina de gótico altar?  

> ¡Oh mármol! ¡Oh nieves! ¡Oh inmensa blancura que esparces doquiera tu casta hermosura!  
> ¡Oh tímida virgen! ¡Oh casta vestal!  
> Tu estás en la estatua de eterna belleza; de tu hábito blando nació la pureza,  
> ¡al ángel das alas, sudario al mortal!\(^{15}\)

What is whiter than lilies' immaculate white?  
What is purer than tapers with mystical light?  
What more chaste than the blossoms that orange-trees wear?  
What more virgin than mist as it drifts soft and fine?  
What more holy than stones on the altars that bear The white Host, food divine?

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\(^{14}\)\textit{Swans, Cygnets, Owls}, p. 9.

\(^{15}\)\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 44, 46.
O soft snow!  O pure marble!  O infinite whiteness,
You bestow everywhere your own lovely chaste brightness!
O shy nun!  O pure vestal to chastity vowed!
You are part of the beauty that statues possess;
And sweet purity's home is your lovely soft dress.
You give wings to the angels and mankind, a shroud!16

José Santos Chocano evidences a similar purpose in "La Magnolia":

En el bosque, de aromas y de músicas lleno.
la magnolia florece delicada y ligera,
cual vellón que en las zarzas enredado estuviera
o cual copo de espuma sobre lago sereno.

Es un ánfora digna de un artífice heleno,
un marmóreo prodigio de la Clásica Era;
y destaca su fina redondez a manera
de una dama que luce descotado su seno.17

Deep in the forest, full of song and fragrance,
Blooms the magnolia, delicate and light,
Like snowy wool among the thorns entangled,
Or, on the quiet lake, a foam-flake white.

It is a vase worthy of a Grecian maker,
A marble wonder of the classic days;
It shows its fine, firm roundness, like a lady
Who with bared breast her loveliness displays.18

Concerning the moon as a symbol of beauty, Rylands comments: "... The more simple and elementary value
of the moon is as something beautiful in itself, ... and
the general association is ... with romance and love....

16Ibid., pp. 45, 47.
18Ibid., pp. 209, 211.
The emotion aroused is . . . one . . . of delight. . . ."

Byron gives us an excellent example of the simplest poetic usage:19

We'll go no more a-roving
So late into the night,
Thought the heart be still as loving
And the moon be still as bright.

We'll go no more a-roving
By the light of the moon.

"Byron suggests by juxtaposition (of bright and moon) a symbolical relation between the love of the heart and the light of the moon, . . ."20

Rylands continues:

W. B. Yeats in *Ideas of Good and Evil* has the following significant passage: "There are no lines with more melancholy beauty than those by Burns,

The wan moon is setting ayont the white wave,
   And Time is setting with me, O!

And the lines are perfectly symbolical. Take from them the whiteness of the moon, the wave, whose relation to the setting of time is too subtle for the intellect, and you take from them their beauty. But when all are together, moon and wave and whiteness and the last melancholy cry, they evoke an emotion which can be evoked by no other arrangement of colours and sound and form. We may call this metaphorical writing, but it is better to call it symbolical writing. . . .21


20 Ibid., p. 52.  
21 Ibid., p. 52.
Walter de la Mare's short poem "Silver" is built entirely around the word of its title, and the silver comes from the moon, casting its silver spell of magic beauty over all it touches.

Another positive use of white is as a symbol of "purity, chastity, innocence, spotlessness, and to a less extent, of peace." Pratt found that Chaucer used color symbolically, white being used for purity and innocence.

It has been suggested that it is sometimes difficult to interpret an exact meaning from a symbol, and that a symbol may have more than one meaning. This is no doubt true of Spenser's use of the swans in his "Prothalamion." However, it would seem that they symbolize beauty, purity, and love, and this would be consistent with the occasion for which the poem was written (a double wedding):

   With that I saw two swannes of goodly hewe
    Come softly swimming downe along the lee;
   Two fairer birds I yet did never see:
   The snow which doth the top of Pindus strew
    Did never whiter shew,
   Nor Jove himselfe, when he a swan would be
   For love of Leda, whiter did appear:
   Yet Leda was, they say, as white as he,
   Yet not so white as these, nor nothing neare:

22 Wittick, Symbols, Signs, p. 293.

So purely white they were,
That even the gentle stream, the which them bare,
Seem'd foule to them, and bad his billowes spare
To wet their silken feathers, least they might
Soyle their fayre plumes with water not so fayre,
And marre their beauties bright,
That shone as heavens light
Against their brydale day, which was not long:
    Sweete Themmes, runne softly,till I end my song.24

Still another positive aspect of white used symbolically
is that of radiance, which Davis says is "that aspect of
whiteness which most fascinates the poet."25 He says that
in Ronsard's poetry the pearl image calls attention to this
radiance, and that almost all the images which Ronsard used
for flesh can be distinguished from those which he used for
inanimate objects by just this quality of brightness.26

Pratt says that

Keats' emphasis in "Hyperion" is on Whites, es-
pecially Whites kindled with shining light. . . . one
who studies his use of these (Whites) feels that they
were particularly attractive to him and depicted by him
with loving relish. The reason for this seems to me
to lie in the intensity of his sensuous endowment. . . .
In significant accord, therefore, with the fullness of
his sensuous nature, is his passionate enjoyment of

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25 M. Gerard Davis, "Colour in Ronsard's Poetry," Modern
Language Review, XL (April, 1945), 98.

26 Davis, "Colour in Ronsard's Poetry," p. 98.
white light, the radiance of the uncolored beam of sunlight, strongest among visual stimulants.27

It might be suggested that the white radiance in the following lines from "Hyperion" symbolizes dignity:

And in each face he saw a gleam of light,  
But splendider in Saturn's, whose hoar locks  
Shone like the bubbling foam about a keel  
When the prow sweeps into a midnight cove.  
In pale and silver silence they remain'd,  
Till suddenly a splendour, like the morn,  
Pervaded all the beetling gloomy steeps,  
All the sad spaces of oblivion,  
And every gulf, and every chasm old,  
And every height, and every sullen depth,  
Voiceless, or hoarse with loud tormented streams:  
And all the everlasting cataracts,  
And all the headlong torrents far and near,  
Mantled before in darkness and huge shade,  
Now saw the light and made it terrible.  
It was Hyperion.28

The kind of dignity and majesty evoked through a sort of awe at the whiteness or brightness is also related to the use of white in religious symbolism. Our earliest records of religious practices include mention of white robes, white animals for sacrifices, white coverings used for the altar and the pulpit. The use of white in Christian practices is probably influenced by the religious literature which describes Christ's raiment as "white as the light" (Matt. 17:2) or "as

27Pratt, The Use of Color in the Verse of English Romantic Poets, pp. 80, 82.
28Keats, Complete Poetry, p. 263.
'white as snow' (Mark 9:3). In Ecclesiastes (9:8) white garments are expressive of joy; in Isaiah (1:18) white is employed to suggest cleansing of sin; while in Revelation (3:4) those of Sardis who have not defiled their garments shall walk in white.29

Other symbolic uses of white in a positive sense could be given, but these should give some indication of its importance.

In direct contrast to the positive influence of white is that of its negative influence. Cirlot comments: "White, in so far as its negative quality of lividness goes, is symbolic of death and the moon, the latter being the symbolic source of a number of rites and customs."30

This symbolic indication of the moon is seen in Mary Coleridge's poem "In Dispraise of the Moon":

I would not be the Moon, the sickly thing,  
To summon owls and bats upon the wing;  
For when the noble Sun is gone away,  
She turns his night into a pallid day.

She hath no air, no radiance of her own,  
That world unmusical of earth and stone.  
She wakes her dim, uncoloured, voiceless hosts,  
Ghost of the Sun, herself the sun of ghosts.

29 Wittick, pp. 293, 294.

The mortal eyes that gaze too long on her
Of Reason's piercing ray defrauded are.
Light in itself doth feed the living brain;
That light, reflected, but makes darkness plain. 31

Havelock Ellis, in his study of the colour-sense of literature, observed of Rossetti that

The really characteristic feature in his colour-scheme is . . . the white. He uses it variously and copiously, preferably not as the conventional symbol of beauty but as the symbol of terror and dread. This may be seen very clearly in "Sister Helen," but it penetrates all his poetic work, and if we were to include his very frequent use of "wan," "pale," "gray," this tendency would be seen to dominate his whole imaginative work in literature. Rossetti has given the fullest imaginative expression to the latent northern feelings for white as the colour of dimly terrible things, the colour of the pale mists that enwrap the vague supernatural powers of lands that know little of the sun. 32

Walter de la Mare's poem "Whiteness" views a snowy winter scene as "Here where there stirs no hint of life."

Another facet in the use of white symbolically is one of blandness, a sort of neutral quality, neither positive nor negative. It evokes a rather melancholy reflection, and is seen in such use as that Nathaniel Hawthorne makes of it in his story "The White Old Maid." The story begins:

31 Behold, This Dreamer!, edited by Walter de la Mare (New York, 1939), pp. 159, 160.

The moonbeams came through two deep and narrow windows, and showed a spacious chamber richly furnished in an antique fashion. From one lattice the shadow of the diamond panes was thrown upon the floor; the ghostly light, through the other, slept upon a bed, falling between the heavy silken curtains, and illuminating the face of a young man. But, how quietly the slumberer lay! how pale his features! and how like a shroud the sheet was wound about his frame!

[Two young women (sisters) had loved the young man. It is hinted that the one he had rejected caused his death, and that this was known to the other sister. The "guilty" sister went away while the other sister remained in the town. She became a pathetic figure, always dressed in a long white garment which caused her to be called "The Old Maid in the Winding Sheet." Many years passed, then one day the Old Maid made her way to the same old house where another old lady also came. When neither reappeared, the aged clergyman and an old man with a torch entered the mansion. They found no sign of life. Suddenly the clergyman remembered something--]

... the clergyman seized the torch from the old man, but in his haste to throw open the door, the torch light was extinguished, leaving them no other light than the moonbeams, which fell through two windows in the spacious chamber. ... the Old Maid in the Winding Sheet was seated, the other (lady) kneeling before her. ... only the shadow of a tattered curtain waving betwixt the dead face and the moonlight.

"Both dead!" said the venerable man. "Then who shall divulge the secret? Methinks it glimmers to and from in my mind, like the light and shadow across the Old Maid's face. And now 't is gone!" 33

While the choice of the most fitting symbolic element in "The White Old Maid" might be that of death, or sorrow, or just indefiniteness, it is still not exactly the same

use which Hawthorne makes of white in *The Marble Faun*.

Here a sense of ambivalence seems to prevail. It is true that the white of the doves, of Hilda's tower, in fact Hilda's own fairness are to a certain extent indicative of purity--"other-worldness"--it is not always possible to maintain that this is Hawthorne's implication. Hilda's main impression seems to be felt as a sort of nothingness, as Birdsall remarks: "... Hilda's white purity seems a spiritual dead end."34

A further observation concerning the meaning of white was made by Anton Brucks, a physician, to whom it is symbolic of sterility. That this may be a quality in the literature is suggested by George MacFadden's commentary on Wallace Stevens:

Most of Stevens' symbols are "natural" in the sense of "readily acceptable" of "not arbitrary." The spectrum of his color symbolism begins naturally with black, the frame, as it were, of reality. Next to the frame (to continue the metaphor) lies white, as if the white of a mat. Hi Simons has shown that white has the connotation of sterility in Mallarme and, he contends, in Stevens.35

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These quotations may possibly be so interpreted:

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.36

The sun of Asia creeps above the horizon
Into this haggard and tenuous air,
A tiger lamed by nothingness and frost.37

MacFadden, however, prefers to think that the significance of white in Steven's verse is "its association through cold, ice, and snow with the notion of stasis, of shape and form in opposition to the formlessness of night and black."38

The observations and illustrations in this chapter point unquestionably to the significance of white used symbolically. They are a mere hint as to the richness of this use. It would seem that almost all of the poets in English literature, from Chaucer to the present, the French Parnassians and Symbolists, the Spanish-American Modernists, and several of the American writers find white an intriguing and enriching element for symbolic use.

This symbolic use of white is extended in its psychological implications, as will be seen in the following chapter.


37Ibid., p. 153. 38MacFadden, "Probings," p. 188.
CHAPTER IV

SOME PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF WHITE

Because symbols are at the very core of psychological and psychoanalytic theory, their use will be treated in this chapter with a different emphasis from that used in the preceding chapter. In Chapter III the purpose was to suggest symbolic use without any necessary psychological significance. In this chapter concerning psychological implications it will be necessary to enlarge the concept of the symbol. Fromm's term "conventional symbol" was used in the former chapter; his term "universal symbol" will be referred to in this chapter. By "universal symbol" Fromm means a symbol "in which the relationship between the symbol and that which is symbolized is not coincidental but intrinsic."¹ Also, the universal symbol is one which can have meaning to all men because it is "rooted in the properties of our body, our sense, and our mind, which are common to all men."² These symbols do not have to be learned,

²Ibid., p. 18.
and Fromm cites as evidence of this the fact that symbols used in the myths and dreams of primitive cultures are similar to those used in highly civilized cultures such as Egypt and Greece. Symbols will sometimes differ in meaning because of differences in their relationships with environment. That is, to those people who live near the equator, the sun will probably have the meaning of a searing destructiveness, while to those who live in a northern area it will indicate a pleasant comforting warmth.

Fromm's concept of the symbol will not be the only one of value, however, for other concepts can be useful in the interpretation of symbols in literature. The psychological theory of Sigmund Freud is probably the one which has been most widely accepted and used. Freud was much indebted to literature in the development of his theory, and Lionel Trilling says "the human nature of Freudian psychology is exactly the stuff upon which the poet has always exercised his art." It is not necessary to detail Freud's basic psychology, but elements of it will be referred to throughout this chapter.

Also of interest to this study is the following excerpt from Wittick:

3Ibid., p. 18.

Nietzsche says that in the same way that man reasons in his dreams, he reasoned when in the waking state many thousands of years ago, and that the dream carries us back into earlier states of human culture, and affords us a means of understanding them better. This is the theme of much of Jung's writing [his "collective unconscious."] Its interest in the study of symbolism is that it links the symbolism of dreams with the symbolism of primitive peoples, their beliefs and religions; and from primitive religions emerge the doctrinal religions of civilization, each with its cargo of symbolism.

... This symbolism of religion figures prominently in the arts, for it was in the service of religion that art in its many forms has developed so profoundly and extensively. Thus it is logical to think of symbolism in religion and then in the various arts.5

Related to the idea in the preceding quotation is David Daiches' comment that psychology lends itself to literary criticism because it helps in explaining how literature comes into being; it helps in understanding the literary artist; and it helps in interpreting the literary work itself. Dryden felt that literature should provide "a just and lively image of human nature." If this is true, or if the purpose of literature is at least some kind of "illumination of the human situation," then psychology can be helpful.6 Psychology's concern is with the motivating forces in man; and this is also the theme of many of the early myths,

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legends and folk tales which deal with such events in the lives of men and nature as birth, initiation, trial, death and rebirth.

... Oedipus, Cinderella, Psyche, Helen of Troy, Don Juan, Aladdin or Gyges, David the slayer of Goliath or Jack-the-giant-Killer, Sindbad or Ulysses, Hercules or Samson—all these characters are not so much historical individuals as projections of the wishes, passions, and hopes of all mankind.7

It is, then, as representations of motivating forces that universal symbols become significant in literature. Is the use of white such a force? Has it been used in the literature in such a way as to indicate that it has such force? An examination of some of the works of literature should provide an answer.

The primary concern of this section is to apply the psychological approach to an examination of specific works of literary art. Before going further, however, it will be helpful to consider briefly the theory of Robert Graves, set forth in his monumental study The White Goddess, concerning the inspiration of the literary artist, since his conclusions are not only interesting and important in themselves but quite pertinent to the immediate subject.

Graves designates his work as "a historical grammar of poetic myth." He says:

My thesis is that the language of poetic myth anciently current in the Mediterranean and Northern Europe was a magical language bound up with popular religious ceremonies in honour of the Moon-goddess, or Muse, some of them dating from the Old Stone age, and that this remains the language of true poetry--"true" in the nostalgic modern sense of "the unim-provable original, not a synthetic substitute." 8

Graves says further that in late Minoan times the invaders from Central Asia brought with them a patrilinear institution which they substituted for the matrilinear institution they found, and that they then "falsified" the myths to conform to these social changes. Graves' attitude toward the Greek philosophers is that they dis-claimed "magical poetry" as "threatening to their new religion of logic." The Greeks displaced the "language of poetic myth," with a "rational poetic language (now called the Classical)." The Greek view has prevailed, and myths, formerly so integral a part of the culture, have degenerated to the status of "quaint relics of the nursery age of mankind." For a while the language of poetic myth was kept alive through the secret Mystery cults of Eleusis, Corinth, and Samothrace, and was taught in poetic colleges in Ireland and Wales. By the end

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of the seventeenth century, however, it was practically non-existent.9

Graves does feel that some true poetry is still produced, but that its appearance is haphazard and unpredictable, because there is no consistent training of poets in grammar or in vocabulary. Thus the appearance of true poetry is somewhat miraculous.10

On page fifty David Daiches is reported as saying that the purpose of literature is some kind of "illumination of the human situation." Graves' understanding of the use or function of poetry is not unrelated:

. . . The function of poetry is religious invocation of the Muse; its use is the experience of mixed exaltation and horror that her presence excites. But "nowadays"? . . . the application has changed. This was once a warning to man that he must keep in harmony with the family of living creatures among which he was born, by obedience to the wishes of the lady of the house; it is now a reminder that he has disregarded the warning, turning the house upside down by capricious experiments in philosophy, science and industry, and brought ruin on himself and his family. "Nowadays" is a civilization in which the prime emblems of poetry are dishonoured. In which serpent, lion and eagle belong to the circus-tent; ox, salmon and boar to the cannery; racehorse and greyhound to the betting ring; and the sacred grove to the saw-mill. In which the Moon is despised as a burned-out satellite of the Earth and woman reckoned as "auxiliary State personnel." In which money will buy almost anything but truth, and almost anyone but the truth-possessed poet.11

9Ibid., pp. 10, 12. 10Ibid., p. 12.
The Theme of true poetry, according to Graves, is the old story of the birth, life, death and resurrection of the "God of the Waxing Year." The story relates his losing struggle with the "God of the Waning Year" for the love of the powerful and changeable "Threefold Goddess" who is their mother, their bride, and their "layer-out."

"... All true poetry... celebrates some incident or scene in this very ancient story, and the three main characters are so much a part of our racial inheritance that they not only assert themselves in poetry but recur on occasions of emotional stress in the form of dreams, paranoiac visions and delusions."

The Goddess is a lovely, slender woman with a hooked nose, deathly pale face, lips red as rowan-berries, startlingly blue eyes and long fair hair; she will suddenly transform herself into sow, mare, bitch, vixen, she-ass, weasel, serpent, owl, she-wolf, tigress, mermaid or loathsome hag. Her names and titles are innumerable. In ghost stories she often figures as "The White Lady," and in ancient religions, from the British Isles to the Caucasus, as the "White Goddess." Some of her titles are: Rhea, Hera, Cardea, Diana, Alphito ("the White Goddess"), Paphian Venus, Ceres, Juno, Hecate, Io (the white cow aspect of the Goddess as Barley-goddess), Isis. I write of her as the White Goddess because white is her principal colour, the colour of the first member of her moon-trinity. ...

The most comprehensive and inspired account of the Goddess in all ancient literature is contained in Apuleius' *Golden Ass.*

Among those who are called poets, Graves considers these to have had an acquaintance with the White Goddess: Shakespeare (who "knew and feared her"); John Donne; Keats

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(who called her "La Belle Dame Sans Merci"); Coleridge (whose woman dicing with Death . . . is "as faithful a record of the White Goddess as exists"); Edmund Spenser; John Skelton; Ben Jonson.\textsuperscript{14}

Again, Graves says:

\begin{quote}
Since the source of poetry's creative power is not scientific intelligence, but inspiration--however this may be explained by scientists--one may surely attribute inspiration to the Lunar Muse, the old and most convenient European term for this source? . . . A Muse-poet falls in love, absolutely, and his true love is for him the embodiment of the Muse. . . . the real, perpetually obsessed Muse-poet distinguishes between the Goddess as manifest in the supreme power, glory, wisdom and love of woman, and the individual woman whom the Goddess may make her instrument for a month, a year, seven years, or even more. The Goddess abides. . . .\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

A further commentary on the significance of the moon will underline Graves' stress on the Moon-Goddess (the White Goddess). Cirlot remarks that the "symbolism of the moon is wide in scope and very complex." The power of the moon is closely related to the agricultural processes, and this helps to explain the significance of the lunar goddesses. Even primitive man was aware of the "relationship between the moon and the tides, and of the more mysterious connection between the lunar cycle and the physiological cycle of woman."

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 426-439.
\item \textsuperscript{15}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 490.
\end{itemize}
The changes which apparently occur in the surface of the moon account for its association with changeableness (The Moon-Goddess assumes many personalities and shapes). These modifications in shape and the phases through which the moon passes are determining factors in the seasons of the year, and thus are related to the changes in human life "the laws of change, growth (from youth to maturity) and decline (from maturity to old age). This accounts for the mythic belief that the moon's invisible phase corresponds to death in man.

Because of its passive character—in that it receives its light from the sun—the moon is equated with the passive or feminine principle. (It is also related to the Egg of the World, the matrix and the casket.)

There are other significances of the moon, but these are sufficient to indicate some of the implications it has with regard to white, the color most closely associated with the moon.

One of the most interesting and consistent uses of white as a motivating force in literature is found in folk tales. The earliest literature of the world—Egyptian,

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17 Ibid., p. 205.
Indian, Chinese, Hebrew, all included folk tales--stories of the folk--many of which were written for didactic or religious purposes. These tales have served as the source for other stories which have appeared in various forms all over the world. The folk tale was originally communicated orally, and the art of storytelling was carried on by persons whose profession it was. Thomas Kiernan says that "Ireland is one of the few countries in the world where the ancient art of storytelling is still alive; where an old man of the village tells his stories at the open fire on winter nights. . . ."\(^{18}\) In the introduction to his book, Mr. Kiernan comments:

> In every language, certain stories survive--they have the common denominator of simplicity. Also wonder. There is magic in all of them. Most often it is the magic of transformation.

> Since transformation is the basis of psychology, one might conclude that their importance lies in their psychic content. Since they have remained in living-meaning and interest through hundreds of generations of a racial community, it could be inferred that their psychic content relates to what is common to the human community rather than, as in modern-invented stories, to individual experience.

> It has been seen that the struggle within man is not greatly different over ages and areas of the world. The social patterns differ profoundly, but not the choices, trials, fulfillments of the human soul.\(^{19}\)


Mr. Kiernan has translated four Irish folk tales, all four of which use white significantly. A summary of one of these stories, "Conn-Ide," will give a background for observations concerning this use.

**CONN-IDE**

Long before time, in the land of Ireland, a son, Conn-Ide, was born to the good and wise rulers, Conn (head), and his consort Ide (fate, destiny). An unusual birthmark called "The mark of the tree" called forth the prophecy "The tree will enclose him, as the petals of the rose the stamen." Conn-Ide often dreamed of the Tree, and it was always frightening to him, as it seemed to be approaching him, and about to enclose him. Later, after the death of his mother, the Arch-Druid explained the meaning of the Tree, the golden apples, and the wonderful Holy City. Conn-Ide was eager to see all these things. He began his search at the White Mountain, the Mountain of the Light of the Sun. As he left his father's kingdom, he was guided by the white light that led to the Sliabh Bana (White Mountain). This strange white light seemed to spring from the summit to the skies. The ascent of the mountain was very difficult, and Conn-Ide was diverted from his journey for a restful, refreshing visit with the Hen-woman. She would have liked for Conn-Ide to stay with her but he felt both the desire, and the compulsion to resume his journey, following the white light which streamed from the top of the mountain.

As Conn-Ide reached the cell of the White Druid at the top of the White Mountain, he saw that the white light did not come from that cell, but that its source was a large crystal tower, round and canopied that looked down on the mountain and the world.

Conn-Ide felt that "the pendulum of his heart was swinging easily to and fro within his breast. Like a censer offering incense, he thought."

The White Druid of the mountain told Conn-Ide that the white light came from the goddess whom he worshipped, and that only those who knew of her could see the light. Conn-Ide was curious to find out how it was that the light diffused itself. He now saw that the light
emanating from the grianan poured to the heavens. It was a straight upward movement of the energies. As if mirrored back, this light spread down more strongly than the thin silver stream that poured up. He marveled at the redoubled power of reflection from above. But he had another, more personal interest in the grianan, for he knew that the Ide or fate part of him was being unraveled for a beginning within the shining tower.

Conn was able to complete his journey with the magic help of a little shaggy mare, an iron ball, and directions given him by the Bird with the Human Head. Conn's hardest task was at the end of the journey where his instructions were to kill his wonderful little shaggy mare. As he did so, however, he realized it was a sacrificial act. And after he had been received by the Queen, the ruler of the Holy City, his little shaggy mare was restored to him in her true life as the daughter of the Queen. Conn's dream of the Tree was fulfilled in the Queen who was the Tree, and whose branches enveloped him. From her countenance he felt the rays of the white light he had seen. "The rays were above where he lay, but gradually were turned down as the Queen bent her eyes toward him. The rays were from her eyes, or rather were concentrated in one luminous flow as from both eyes melted into one great eye of wondrous beauty." Conn knew that he had never seen, never imagined beauty such as he now saw.

"A Rioghan an tSuile," he called, "Queen of the Eye. Thula. Goddess Thula."

After a time, Conn returned to rule his father's kingdom, but he went to and from the Holy City at will "for its infinitude of pleasures."

"At last his kingdom was burned up at the end of time and he joined his Queen in the Holy City forever."20

In his commentary on this story (and the others in his book) Kiernan acknowledges his indebtedness to the "mode of insight" used by Heinrich Zimmer, "a pioneer in the modern approach to folk tales." This approach takes the stories

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20Ibid., pp. 41-69.
as being "alive" and endeavors to "relate them to contemporary human conditions."\(^{21}\)

The crisis in the story is in the "forces of masculinity maturing in the boy. Kiernan quotes Newmann: It (the male ego) is thrust out from the maternal matrix, and it finds itself by distinguishing itself from this matrix. In the sociological sense, too, the male, once he grows up and becomes independent, is thrust out from the matrix to the degree that he experiences and accentuates his own difference and singularity. It is one of the fundamental experiences of the male that sooner or later he must experience the matrix, with which he originally lived in participation mystique, as the "You," the nonego, something different and strange.\(^{22}\)

And Kiernan remarks:

Conn-Ide is an account of the thrusting of the male from the maternal matrix and the journey of effort and sacrifice that fits him to enter the divine matrix. It is a story illustrating cosmic creation and redemption. Creation is forced on the created; redemption is self-elective.\(^{23}\)

Conn-Ide could have chosen to quit his journey soon after its beginning—he could have stayed with the Hen woman on the side of the mountain—but the white light shining from the top of the mountain "compelled" him to continue his journey. Conn's quest in this journey is for the golden apples from the Tree which was so frightening to him as a child. The quest is spurred, however, and given focus by the light which rays from above him. This white light comes from the source of life—the Goddess—who gives Conn direction

\(^{22}\)Ibid., pp. 70, 71.  \(^{23}\)Ibid., p. 71.
through the White Druid, her priest; and through the shaggy horse, Conn's anima; through the Bird with the Human Head, his inspiration; through the stone, reason and intellect; and through the iron ball, "a conviction of faith, . . . the steady and steadfast pursuit of principle toward a faith-known goal." The purpose of life has to be beyond life—the white light. Kiernan suggests that in addition to the motif of the stages passed through by the male principle, there is also the motif that "dependent on the success of the male adventure, the other [motif] recounts the way in which the eternal city found its duality of royal rule restored to its Queen" (Graves' "White Goddess"?).

In the spirit of "The Dilettante Among Symbols" suggested by Zimmer in his The King and the Corpse, one other folk tale will be mentioned. This one seems to be "alive" in the United States today. It is told by J. Frank Dobie, who calls it "The Pacing White Steed of the Prairies."

This superb white stallion became the "composite of all superb stallions," the "symbol of all wild and beautiful and

\[\text{\textsuperscript{24}}\text{Ibid., pp. 75-77.} \quad \text{\textsuperscript{25}}\text{Ibid., p. 80.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{26}}\text{Heinrich Zimmer, The King and the Corpse--Tales of the Soul's Conquest of Evil (New York, 1956), p. 5.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{27}}\text{J. Frank Dobie, I'll Tell You a Tale (Boston, 1960), pp. 53-58.}\]
fleet horses." The magnificent animal was given a variety of names: "the White Steed of the Prairies," "the Pacing White Stallion," "the White Mustang," "the Ghost Horse of the Plains." "His fire, grace, beauty, speed, endurance, and intelligence were exceeded only by his passion for liberty." He was described as being not pure white but light cream with a snow-white mane and tail.28

The stories about him vary. Some say that he was never caught. Some say that after he had paced (he always paced) two hundred miles from his regular range (reported, variously, from the mesas of Mexico to the Badlands of the Dakotas and beyond, from the Brazos bottoms of eastern Texas to parks in the Rocky Mountains) he was finally roped by a vaquero who, with the help of two other men, staked him securely, placing water near-by. For ten days and nights he stood, apparently unaware of the water and the abundant grass in which he stood. Then he lay down and died (he always "died" on the tenth day in the stories which reported him as having been captured).29

But if it is true that he died--it is also true that he lives again! In Defenders of Wildlife News, Burnett C. Drumm reports that he has been seen "frequently" by personnel at the

28Ibid., pp. 53, 54.  29Ibid., pp. 55, 56.
Atomic Energy Test Site in Nevada. He also relates that, at a roundup of wild horses in the 1930's, a snow-white stallion was in the group caught. As the horses mingled in the corral

Two cowboys stood long and silently looking at the horse. Finally one said, "Think it could be the Phantom Wild Stallion?" The other slowly nodded and said, "Yeah. Could be. Better let him go." With that he was cut out from among the wild horses and released to freedom.30

The significance of this tale? It is a living legend—and the stallion is always white.

White is also significant psychologically in poetry. Two poets who seem peculiarly drawn to this use of white are Coleridge and Keats.

If Graves' comment that Coleridge's woman dicing with death is "as faithful a record of the White Goddess as exists" (page fifty-four above), then the poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" in which she appears should reveal something of her influence. Also, if Graves' suggestion that the function of true poetry "was once a warning to man that he must keep in harmony with the family of living creatures among which he was born..."31, then the reason for the stress placed on


the Mariner's crime can be fixed. At first glance the killing of the Albatross would not seem a dastardly deed, and indeed the crewmen themselves vacillated in their attitude toward it. However, the weight of the wrong "has the nature of a crime against the sanctity of a guest--the sin which, according to ancient feeling, incurred the special wrath of Heaven and called out the Erinys upon the track of the offender."32 Bush says that the Mariner's crime "isolates him from his kind."33

Maud Bodkin sees "The Ancient Mariner" as a pattern of the Rebirth archetype. She reasons that after the Mariner commits his crime and before he experiences Rebirth his impulse is toward the death instinct. It would seem to be his loss that the Lady Life-in-Death won him. Graves says that Coleridge's expression "Her skin was white as leprosy" is "strangely exact":

... The whiteness of the Goddess has always been an ambivalent concept. In one sense it is the pleasant whiteness of pearl-barley, or a woman's body, or milk, or unsmutched snow; in another it is the horrifying whiteness of a corpse, or a spectre, or leprosy.34


34 Graves, p. 434.
And just as the Goddess' white is ambivalent, so is the Mariner's fate--Life-Death.

After the spectre-bark has disappeared, leaving the "thick" night, the first gleam of hope comes from "The horned Moon, with one bright star." The first disclosure of the Moon, however, is not of beauty, nor of hope, but of the boat's crew who "Each turned his face with a ghastly pang,/And cursed me with his eye." The Mariner's Life-in-Death has begun. For "Seven days, seven nights, I saw that curse,/And yet I could not die." Then

The moving Moon went up the sky,
And nowhere did abide:
Softly she was going up,
And a star or two beside--

In the gentle brightness of this light, the Mariner could see beauty in things which before had been repulsive. And life seemed desirable (where previously death had been desired). Bodkin describes this experience (of watching, or being watched by, the dead men) as one of "strain and tension." She says this is caused by the "easily recognized familiar tendency toward life-activity and self-preservation" which balances the Nirvana principle (death instinct). Before

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36 Ibid.
complete release comes for the Mariner—indicated in the activity in the elements—there comes "a moment of true and blissful quiescence:" 37

O sleep! it is a gentle thing,
Beloved from pole to pole!
To Mary Queen the praise be given!
She sent the gentle sleep from Heaven,
That slid into my soul.

It is from this sleep, sent by Mary, queen and mother, that the Mariner wakes renewed, as though by death:

I was so light—almost
I thought that I had died in sleep,
And was a blessed ghost.

Not only is the sleep sent by Mary, but, as just noted, the moment which the sensitive reader feels as bringing the first relaxation of tension is the moment when the Mariner yearns towards the moon and stars as they move, like adored presences, through their native domain. It is, as Coleridge's marginal gloss reminds us, by the light of the moon that the beauty and happiness of the creatures of the calm is so revealed that in place of loathing the Mariner's impulse of love flows forth. Beneath the words in which Coleridge describes the moon lie haunting associations through which the moon's name and image have become those of goddess, queen of Heaven, and mother, in the imagination of men. It is, then, as through a mother's power that the renewed childlike vision, reaching outward in love and delight, has come to the man in his despair. 38

After this experience, the elements break forth, and the Mariner's return to life is activated. Over this stormy scene the "moving Moon" is vigilant: "The Moon was at its

37 Bodkin, p. 69. 38 Ibid., pp. 69, 70.
edge." . . . "The Moon was at its side." It was in this light that the living spirits "worked" the ship for the dead crew.

It is still the "moving Moon" in Part VI that draws the Mariner's ship, as the ocean "His great bright eye most silently/Up to the Moon is cast-"; and it is the Moon which bathes in beauty the sight of his own countree:

The harbor-bay was clear as glass,
So smoothly it was strewn!
And on the bay the moonlight lay,
And the shadow of the Moon.

The rock shone bright, the kirk no less,
That stands above the rock:
The moonlight steeped in silentness
The steady weathercock.

And the bay was white with silent light

The Moon-goddess is watching over her charge.

However "The Ancient Mariner" may be interpreted, the influence of white in its various associations with the moon is a definite psychological factor.

Four of Keats' poems were examined for their psychological importance with regard to white. Two, "The Eve of St. Agnes " and the longer "Hyperion," were not pursued at any length because the reading of them leaves the over-all impression that although each is rich in the use of white,

or light, this use is largely in the interest of pure visual beauty. As Bush comments: "'The Eve of St. Agnes' is the work of a happy lover . . . rich in pictorial and verbal beauty . . . (which serves to veil) the romantic thinness of the human emotions . . . the sensations remain largely aesthetic and material."\(^{40}\)

"La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is called by Bush "an anti-romantic reply to 'The Eve of St. Agnes' and a piece of romantic magic."\(^{41}\) He mentions that the blend of love and beauty and evil reminds one of the same elements in Coleridge's "Christabel." Evert says that while "La Belle Dame" is "maddeningly simple" the reader is "given so much to ponder and so little to discuss." He feels that one responds to the entire poem, or not at all, and quotes C. D. Thorpe's basic interpretation that it is "expressive of the ashes to which are turned, so often, the worldly hope men set their hearts upon."\(^{42}\) Evert cites several critics' conclusions as to the meaning of the poem, but interestingly enough he does not mention Robert Graves, who gives a rather comprehensive interpretation of this poem. Repeated references to

\(^{40}\)Bush, p. 135. \(^{41}\)Ibid. \(^{42}\)Walter H. Evert, Aesthetic and Myth in the Poetry of Keats (Princeton, New Jersey, 1965), pp. 244-246.
Graves are not intended to suggest a complete agreement with his thinking. His opinions are quite specific, however, and he has devoted many words to his premise concerning the "White Goddess" and the Theme of "true poetry" that are relevant to this study. Graves says, as one would expect, that Keats' "La Belle Dame" is the White Goddess and hence the Muse. It is significant that, in his own commentary on the poem, Keats places "La Belle Dame" and the Muse in the same framework of thought:

> Why four kisses—you will say—why four because I wish to restrain the headlong impetuosity of my Muse—she would fain have said "score" without hurting the rhyme—but we must temper the Imagination as the Critics say with Judgement. . . .43

Graves cites several possible sources for the ballad, listing as the most important the "Ballad of Thomas the Rhymer." Then Graves suggests Fanny Brawne as Keats' goddess, and the "merry chase" she seems to be giving him (quite characteristic of the capricious White Goddess). Graves also considers the "lily on thy brow" and "And on thy cheeks a fading rose" to be possible evidences of Keats' concern over the consumption which had taken his brother Tom's life and with which he knew himself to be afflicted. "Thus the features of the Belle Dame were beautiful in a strange pale, thin way as Fanny's...

43Graves, p. 429.
were, but sinister and mocking: they represented both the life he loved—and the death he feared." Graves also considers a third element of Keats' life at this time as being of a nightmarish quality: "the spirit of Poetry." He was unable to write as he wished and had stopped work on his never-to-be-completed "Hyperion."

That the Belle Dame represented Love, Death by Consumption (the modern leprosy) and Poetry all at once can be confirmed by a study of the romances from which Keats developed the poem. He seems to have felt intuitively, rather than known historically, that they were all based on the same antique myth. The Queen of Elfland in "Thomas the Rhymer" was the medieval successor of the pre-Celtic White Goddess... She was Death, but she granted poetic immortality to the victims whom she had seduced by her love-charms.

"Lamia" is also a poem which tells of a mortal who is seduced by an immortal, but the over-all tone of the poem is quite different from that of the "Belle Dame." Graves does not comment on this poem except to say that Keats wrote "pityingly of Lamia, the Serpent-goddess [who is] as an aspect of the White Goddess], as if she were a distressed Gretchen or Griselda." Keats seems to identify with the characters in this poem to the extent that Lamia becomes "a pathetic and sympathetic character." Her affection for Lycius seems genuine, and her exposure by Apollonius is

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44 Ibid., pp. 430, 431.
46 Ibid., p. 427.
presented in a manner which elicits sympathy for "tender femininity heartlessly destroyed." Still, she is a lamia, a serpent, a representative of evil. Everts thinks Keats chose his subject purposely to set forth his revised view of the poetic imagination and considers that the poem presents Keats' "demonic view of the poetic imagination." If Everts' argument is valid, it is plain to see why Graves would not comment on this poem since it would indicate that Keats had deserted his Muse—or vice versa.

In the course of the research made for this study, several lyrical poems from various cultures have come into focus. Among these are Charles Baudelaire's "L'Albatros," Stéphane Mallarmé's "Le Cygne," Leopoldo Lugone's "La Blanca Soledad," Walter de la Mare's "Whiteness," Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Sister Helen," and Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

In Baudelaire's "L'Albatros" the poet is compared to a mighty sea bird that is captured and mocked. Trapped in his own element, the poet, like the bird, soars out of it (amid jeering crowds). He is absurd, and as "each white wing/Trails pitifully by the huge bird's side," so "The great one's crippled by his giant pinions." (The great one is of course the poet).

47Evert, pp. 271, 272. 48Ibid., p. 269.
Wallace Fowlie says that "L'Albatros" is an ancestor of Mallarmé's "Le Cygne." In the latter poem Mallarmé's ice-imprisoned white bird has been seen with varied meanings. Fowlie cites Albert Thibaudet as seeing in the fourteen rhymes in the power of a sound able to reproduce the vastness and coldness of monotonous white space. He refers to the analysis of Pierre Beausire, who

... sees the sonnet as a study of hostility between being and becoming. The swan would represent a consciousness attempting to vanquish time, but the world cannot be surpassed no matter how insistently one is called toward the absolute.

Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui
Va-t-il nous déchirer avec un coup d'aile ivre
Ce lac dur oublié que hante sous le givre
Le transparent glacier des vols qui n'ont pas fui!

Will the virginal, strong and handsome today
Tear for us with a drunken flap of his wing
This hard forgotten lake which the transparent glacier
Of flights unflown haunts under the frost!

The new day causes the poet to ponder its possibilities and promises. This occasions for him an "image of a winged creature trying to escape from a frozen lake." "The whiteness of the day as it stretches endlessly over the earth is deceptive. Purity may turn quickly into frigidity" (ice forms on the swan's wings).

50Ibid., p. 97.
51Ibid.
52Ibid.
53Ibid., p. 119.
A swan of former times remembers it is he
Magnificent but who without hope gives himself up
For not having sung of the region where he should have been
When the boredom of sterile winter was resplendent.55

The bird is doomed because he failed to remove himself
from the region where the ice is. Why he failed is not sug-
gested.

... The sonnet of Mallarmé is concerned precisely
with the change from freedom of movement (va-t-il nous
déchirer ce lac?) to an immobilization (où le plumage
est pris), but what is most important in this destiny
of frustration is that it is willed by the swan in
order to insure a maximum pathos of beauty.56

All his neck will shake off this white death-agony
Inflicted by space on the bird which denies space,
But not the horror of the earth where his wings are caught.58

There is a brief struggle, but the death wish seems
evident—the swan's neck is free though the body is held under
the ice. The lake, once a place of freedom, is now a prison.

"Since the fight is waged between two degrees of whiteness:

54Ibid., p. 98.  55Ibid., p. 119.
56Ibid., p. 99.  57Ibid.
58Ibid., p. 119.
the winter frost and the plumage, the scene takes on the aspect of a fantasy, of a spectral silenced combat."\textsuperscript{59} 

Fantôme qu' à ce lieu son pur éclat assigne, 
It s'immobilise au songe froid de mépris 
Que vêt parmi l'exil inutile le Cygne.\textsuperscript{60}

Phantom whom his pure brilliance assigns to this place, 
He becomes immobile in the cold dream of scorn 
Which the Swan puts on in his useless exile.\textsuperscript{61}

The swan is spectre because his whiteness merges with the colour of the snow and ice. Only his moral force, his Pascalian knowledge that he is being crushed, remains to distinguish him from the elements. This exile into hardness and immobility may well be useless—he could have gone elsewhere—but it has given him an inner self-reliance, a hardness of his own, a scorn which he puts on as if it were a mask to cover his suffering.\textsuperscript{62}

The dawning day gave brief hope for liberation and achievement, but death's creeping rigidity brought a "stark ghost-like pattern" to the lake. "The sonnet is the story of human destiny reduced to the final decisive moment when it appears controlled by some implacable law of matter." The poet indicates that man is not able to escape his destiny, though he may dream of doing so. "He has to learn how to live his role: that of permanent self-destroyer."\textsuperscript{63}

In Rossetti's "Sister Helen" (which Bush terms "macabre balladry")\textsuperscript{64} baffled love turns to hate, and hate in the

\textsuperscript{59}Ibid., p. 99. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{60}Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{61}Ibid., p. 119. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{62}Ibid., p. 99. 
\textsuperscript{63}Ibid., pp. 100, 101. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{64}Bush, p. 179.
moment of revenge is baffled by God's curse. Burgum says that "Rossetti very seldom used an emotion at once so distasteful and so sharply defined as that in "Sister Helen."

On the other hand, Benson comments: "Of Rossetti's ballads, "Sister Helen" is the noblest ... is probably the highest achievement of his art."66

The setting is in the light of the moon with the contrasting figures of the waxen image and the innocent brother sharing Sister Helen's balcony. Perhaps it is the white light of the moon and the innocence represented by the small boy which give the ballad its sinister note. The simple straightforward queries of the child mingled with the rhythmic repetitions in each stanza add to the weirdness of the tone. Of course the ghastly spectre of death hovers over all.

There is a striking similarity of tone in the de la Mare poem "Whiteness" and Leopoldo Lugones' "La Blanca Soledad" (The White Solitude). The poem of Lugones seems to have a more mellow touch, but both poems are the "death-face" of white. De la Mare's poem says "... every breath/I breathe is icy chill as death ... Here where there stirs no hint


of life . . . That weeping elm's funereal white, / Bidding the sepulchre of night / To whisper, --'It is cold, my love!'"  

And Lugones' poem says:

La luna cava un blanco abismo  
de quietud, en cuya cuenca  
las cosas son cadáveres  
y las sombras viven como ideas.  
Y uno se pasma de lo próxima  
que está la muerte en la blancura aquella.  
De lo bello que es el mundo  
poseído por la antigüedad de la luna llena.  
Y el ansia tristísima de ser amado,  
en el corazón doloroso tiembla.  

The moon hollows out a white chasm  
of quietness, in whose deep valley  
all things are cadavers  
and even the shadows seem to live as ideas.  
And one marvels at the nearness  
Of death in such whiteness.  
At the beauty with which the world  
is possessed through the antiquity of the full moon.  
And the sad longing to be loved  
quivers painfully in the heart.

Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is, as can be inferred from the title, laid in a setting of white. A man has stopped to contemplate the scene. The poet, however, does not dwell on the sparkling, light beauty of the snow, but speaks of the "frozen lake" and "darkest

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evening." There seems to be a yearning of some kind indicated by the lines "The only other sound's the sweep/Of easy wind and downy flake." John Ciardi suggests that the dark and the snowfall symbolize a death-wish, however momentary, a hunger for final rest and surrender. It would be so easy to go down into the woods and let himself be covered over.69 There is the possible association of pallor with the snow, especially the "downy flake" which would suggest the death-wish. Freud has associated pallor, or paleness, with death.70 Also, it would seem that the last two lines add weight to the death-wish idea, in that sleep and death are often related. "Our death is but a little sleep."

The remaining pages of this chapter will be devoted to a fairly extended analysis of the use of white in two works of nineteenth-century American fiction, Edgar Allan Poe's The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym and Herman Melville's Moby Dick.

Edgar Allan Poe considered himself primarily a poet. He has had great influence, though, on the modern short story,

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particularly with his tales of ratiocination. Poe attempted only one work of sufficient length to be called a book, The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym. In the closing episodes in this book he has presented the terrifying effects of white quite sharply. There has been a great temptation by critics of Poe to analyze all his work from the standpoint of psychoanalysis—the psychoanalysis of the poet, that is, rather than an analysis of his work. This temptation rests, undoubtedly, on his erratic life and the tragic events surrounding his death. Marie Bonaparte has written a book in which she examines both his life and his works in the light of Freudian psychoanalysis. The reading gets a trifle heavy and repetitive, but for the purposes of this study her analysis of A. Gordon Pym is of interest. All of the following ideas are from her book.  

Bonaparte considers this story one of a group which she calls "tales of the mother," and she feels that Poe unconsciously reveals himself through his writing. The sea is a mother symbol of universal understanding and in this story is such for Pym, who is understood by Bonaparte to be Poe.

After many vicissitudes and the death of all aboard the 
*Grampus* except Pym and Peters, these two are rescued by the 
*Jane Guy*, which is on an expedition to the South Seas. One 
day the carcass of a "singular-looking land-animal" was 
picked up.

... It was three feet in length, and but six 
inches in height, with four very short legs, the feet 
armed with long claws of a brilliant scarlet, and 
resembling coral in substance. The body was covered 
with a straight silky hair, perfectly white. The 
tail was peaked like that of a rat, and about a foot 
and a half long. The head resembled a cat's with the 
exception of the ears--these were flopped like the ears 
of a dog. The teeth were of the same brilliant scarlet 
as the claws.\(^{72}\)

This singular animal appears later in the story with great 
importance.

Land was sighted, and four canoes full of black-skinned 
inhabitants rowed out to hail the ship. When Captain Guy 
held up a white handkerchief on the blade of an oar, it 
occaisioned much evidence of fear on the part of the natives, 
which is interpreted as indicating white as a taboo, in-
spiring the natives to both veneration and terror. Later, 
it was discovered that the whiteness of the white men's 
teeth also terrified the totally black natives.

Apparently, all goes well, although of course the men 
on board the *Jane-Guy* and the natives cannot talk, so no one

\(^{72}\)Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems* (New York, 
1938), 848.
really knows exactly what is going on. As the captain and some of his crew are going, in good faith, to the native village, the natives treacherously trap Captain Guy and thirty of his men, burying them beneath a landslide. Pym and Peters escape through a crevice which they had been exploring at the time of the landslide. They witness the killing of the remainder of the crew which had been left on board ship and the explosion of the ship. Much consternation is shown by the natives at this event, and when they discover the strange animal previously described, they are thrown into a frenzy. That the animal is untouchable is clear.

Pym and Peters finally succeed in making an escape from the island, taking with them a native whom they capture. They plan to go to the South Pole. A strange phenomenon is taking place in the water:

March 3. The heat of the water was now truly remarkable, and its color was undergoing a rapid change, being no longer transparent, but of a milky consistency and hue.\(^73\)

Bonaparte says that this milky appearance is symbolic of mother's milk, which Poe is unconsciously symbolizing.

March 4. Today, with the view of widening our sail, the breeze from the northward dying away perceptibly, I took from my coatpocket a white handkerchief. Nu-Nu was seated at my elbow, and the linen

\(^{73}\)Poe, pp. 346, 347.
accidentally flaring in his face, he became violently affected with convulsions. These were succeeded by drowsiness and stupor and low murmuring of Tekeli-li Tekeli-li! [A cry previously associated with the strange animal].

Here Bonaparte comments:

Nu-Nu here seems to succumb to an attack of hysteria, determined by his terror of white. As analysts, we cannot but think—since hysterical convulsions represent anxiety-inhibited genital pleasure—that this white has reactivated memory-traces of infantile masturbation in Nu-Nu's unconscious: masturbation which often occurs in suckling babes in the form of pleasurable but vague feelings akin to those produced by tickling [Tekeli-li]. This would then occasion a terror of white, of milk-colour, among the natives of Tsalal, whose incest-wishes and sexuality appear to have been as precociously repressed as were their creator's while, at the same time, retaining the same anxiety-determined mother-fixation in their unconscious.

Pym indicates a feeling of numbness which does not seem to be experienced by Peters. Bonaparte says this is a "surrender of the replete babe falling asleep on its mother's breast" (the ocean). The milky hue of the ocean becomes even more evident, indicating the unconscious memory of the warm milk drunk from the mother's breasts.

Next appears "a fine white powder, resembling ashes—but certainly not such——" at this Nu-Nu prostrates himself on the bottom of the boat, overcome with terror. Pym and Peters sink into a lethargy from the warmth and motion.

74 Ibid., p. 374. 75 Bonaparte, p. 347. 76 Ibid., p. 348.
The ashy material continues to fall, and "from the milky depths of the ocean a luminous glare arose." A form rising from the vapour seems to be a "limitless cataract," which they are rapidly approaching. Darkness hovers over them, relieved only "by the glare of the water thrown back from the white curtain before us." Bonaparte indicates this darkness as a "return to the womb phantasy . . . about to be gratified; gorged with milk, as it were."  

Many gigantic and pallidly white birds flew continuously now from behind the veil, and their scream was the eternal Tekeli-li! as they retreated from our vision. Hereupon Nu-Nu stirred in the bottom of the boat; but upon touching him, we found his spirit departed.  

The psychoanalytic interpretation offered here is that the mother taboo strikes Nu-Nu down, thus making him an expiatory victim while Pym and Peters "become immune."

And now we rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us.  

Thus the mother, in this consummate wish fulfilment phantasy, reopens her milk-white body to her two sons. And it is Peter the mighty, the hero, who thus re-enters with his brother Pym, as though to lend him potency to do so.  

But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportion than any

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dwellers among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow.81

Here, as in Ligeia, the key to the story is given in the last lines. For now we behold the form to which all Pym's wanderings and adventures led; the great maternal divinity whose sex, though unmentioned, must be that of the "shrouded" figure, the "woman in white," who appeared to the raving Poe in Moyamensing Prison; it is the mother reclaiming her son. Again, the "whiteness of the snow" which shines about this new Diana of the Ephesians, (the whiteness and abundance of milk substituted for her multiple breasts), appears doubly and contradictorily determined. On one hand, she is white as the South Pole and warm with milk and with life, so recalling that blessed time when he was suckled at his mother's breast but, on the other, now related not to milk but to snow, representing coldness and death and so recalling unconscious memories of his pale, dead mother. Given the indifference to time characteristic of the unconscious, we see condensed in this figure the two main attributes Poe successively attached to his mother: milk and death. . . . at the South Pole . . . he is welcomed by a white form swathed in veils of milk that are, also, a shroud. . . . The tale properly ends on the question mark of mysteries unplumbed and the dazzling vision of the mother veiled in symbolic white.82

Bonaparte feels that the narrative portion of A. Gordon Pym is only the upper register, that only the latent content is real and that it is revealing as to the inmost needs and desires of Edgar Allan Poe, the man. This she has sought to "draw to the light."

The final literary work to be considered in this paper is Herman Melville's Moby Dick. In it is found the most

81Poe, p. 882. 82Bonaparte, pp. 350, 351.
extensive app of the use of white, or whiteness, both
in matter of in implication. Its title is soon
revealed a of a massive whale—a white whale, and
he is, in hero of the tale; or, if not the hero,
at least ting "force" of the tale.

Th Moby Dick is told by Ishmael-Melville, and
everyt n under his direction; so it will be helpful
to un mething of Ishmael's "thinking." Paul
Brodt in Ishmael's White World that a first-person
narrator is assumed to be sincere, a quality which he gener-
ally ascribes to Ishmael; but he adds that Ishmael habitually
uses irony and that Ishmael's irony is often evasive. The
effect of this is either to "undercut the phenomenon, or, by
silently noting the falsity of what the speaker says, to
undercut the speaker's judgment."83 Ishmael's case is further
complicated by the fact that his ironical remarks also con-
cern already ambiguous phenomena. All of this serves to
force the reader to depend on his own observations, rather
than relying securely on Ishmael's point of view. In fact,
Ishmael-Melville never actually arrives at a conclusion, but
remains in "a white world."84


84Ibid., pp. 1-10.
This white world is the world of the book. Melville is deliberate in setting his scene. He leads the reader through many chapters of general description and explanation. He lays a full background, giving the impression that he is developing his ideas as he goes along. White is mentioned only a few times in the early part of the book. The voyage is begun on Christmas day, in icy weather, but the ship does not remain long in icy waters. Perhaps the first instance of white to lead to further consideration is in Chapter 20 when Ahab is introduced and attention is called to the "slender rod-like mark, lividly whitish" which travels down one side of his face and neck. He also has a "barbaric white leg" and sometimes sits on an ivory stool in the quarter-deck.

It is not until Chapter 31 that specific mention is made of a white whale. Stubb, the second mate, is aware "there's something special in the wind." A white whale is different.

For several chapters then, nothing more is said about the white whale, but Ishmael-Melville details, somewhat at length, many matters of "Cetology." Ronald Mason feels this to be an essential element in the book since the whale, specifically the White Whale, is the central symbol of the book and perhaps is not familiar enough to the general reader.

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to be meaningful without this detailing. These items serve as a prologue to the introduction of the fearsome Moby Dick himself. In Chapter 36 Captain Ahab challenges his men to "raise" the white whale and offers as a reward a "Spanish ounce of gold" ($16.00). When Starbuck questions the sense of taking vengeance on a dumb brute, something of the white whale's meaning to Ahab is indicated in his words "All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks . . . I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it . . . Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me." As Ahab muses in Chapter 37, he says, "I leave a white and turbid wake; pale waters, paler cheeks. . . ." He says that he wears an iron crown and the "path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run." According to the theory of Freud in the "Theme of the Three Caskets," these thoughts would definitely be related to the death instincts. (Iron is a white metallic substance: pale, pallid). Starbuck's musings in the chapter which follows are in line with this thought. He speaks of a heart

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87 Melville, p. 193.  
88 Ibid., pp. 197, 198.

89 Freud, p. 294.
of "lead" and "grim, phantom futures." Pip's prayer at the end of the chapter "Midnight, Forecastle" is also related:

... Oh, thou big white God aloft there somewhere in yon darkness, have mercy on this small black boy down here; preserve him from all men that have no bowels to feel free.\(^90\)

Now Ishmael-Melville is ready to blend his "three main strands,"\(^91\) Ishmael, Ahab, and the Whale. In Chapter 41, Ahab's relationship to the great White Whale is specified; in Chapter 42, Ishmael's "white world" is painted.

Moby Dick had

... a peculiar snow-white wrinkled forehead, and a high, pyramidical white hump. ... The rest of his body was so streaked, and spotted, and marbled with the same shrouded hue, that, in the end, he had gained his distinctive appellation of the White Whale; a name, indeed, literally justified by his vivid aspect, when seen gliding at high noon through a dark blue sea, leaving a milky-way wake of creamy foam, all spangled with golden gleamings.\(^92\)

To him Ahab attributed an "unexampled, intelligent malignity."\(^93\) Against him Ahab "cherished a wild vindictiveness":

... 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. ... 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

\(^{90}\) Melville, p. 207.  \(^{91}\) Mason, p. 128.  
\(^{92}\) Melville, p. 212.  \(^{93}\) Ibid.
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.  

Against this composite of all evil, Ahab pitted himself inexorably.

Ishmael's response to the whale is of a different nature. His "white world" is not so solidly established. He wavers. In Chapter 42, "The Whiteness of the Whale," Ishmael delineates some of the beautiful things enhanced by white: "marbles, japonicas, and pearls"; he calls attention to the royal pre-eminence suggested by white, to its association with joy, purity, innocence, virginity, the benignity of old age, justice, religious celebrations;

... yet for all these accumulated associations, with whatever is sweet, and honorable, and sublime, there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood.

Melville points out some of the white things which strike terror to a man: "the intolerable hideousness" of the Polar bear, the "white shark of the tropics," the "white phantom" the albatross, the "White Steed of the Prairies." He proceeds to the ultimate, the "king of terrors" which "rides on his pallid horse."

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94Ibid., pp. 213, 214.  95Ibid., p. 219.  96Ibid., pp. 219-222.
But not yet have we solved the incantation of this
whiteness, and learned why it appeals with such power
to the soul; . . . . 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 white-
ness 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 blank-
ness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows--a
colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink?97

Feidelson says that this whiteness becomes "a synonym
for fluid reality" like the "grand hooded phantom" in
Chapter I.98 He also thinks that "the double meaning of
whiteness is a product of imaginative perception . . .
He who would follow Ishmael must exert the symbolic imagination,
for Ishmael's pursuit of the whale is the evolution of an
image. . . . The white shroud of the sea, the plenum of
significance, remains an eternal challenge."99

Parker feels that

. . . Moby Dick, with his ambivalent whiteness,
his solitariness, his mildness and transient fury, his
ubiquitousness and his scars, is, . . . . the noumenon
of nature itself--a comprehensive dynamic symbol for
the whole immense, riddling, uncaring cosmos in which

97Ibid., pp. 225, 226.  98Ibid., p. 29.
man finds himself nurtured, stunned, challenged, and (if he choose and can) at home. The uncaringness is the point.100

Of interest also is Henry Tucker's association of "the menacing quality of whiteness in nature described in Moby Dick" with Albert Camus' use of "whiteness" and "light" in L'Etranger. In L'Etranger these qualities lend "symbolic expression to Meursault's perceptions of a negative existence and of death itself." He does not intend to suggest that these two "disparate authors" mean the same thing by "whiteness" or "light" but does consider that

Melville's explicit association of "whiteness" in nature with "annihilation" seems related to Camus' implicit association of it with death; and the American's association of the quality with "atheism" draws what seems to be justifiable attention to Camus's bright (and white) "absurd universe." 101

When Moby Dick at last becomes the center of the action, the outcome has been anticipated, although it would seem that Melville works with the idea of Ahab's victory until very late: "Nor White Whale, nor man, nor fiend, can so much as graze old Ahab in his own proper and inaccessible being . . . Aloft there! which way?"102 Still there is ambiguity:


102Melville, p. 593.
Ahab attributes aggressiveness to the whale: "Aye, he's chasing me now; not I, him." Starbuck does not: "Moby Dick seeks thee not."  

Moby Dick succeeds in being the instrument of destruction for all the crew of the Pequod except Ishmael.

... the "Pequod," ... disappears into the ambiguity and formlessness of the sea. Only by self-annihilation does the "Pequod" penetrate the whiteness, which closes above it in a "creamy pool." Ishmael, as though to epitomize Melville's position, almost follows, but does not. He is drifting toward the "vital centre" of the swirling vortex when the "coffin life-buoy" suddenly emerges. Ishmael's status remains provisional. He accepts ambiguity and indefiniteness—he is "buoyed up by that coffin"—and yet somehow manages to retain his own "identity."  

White has served to indicate the vastness of a universe and something of the vastness of the problems which beset man in that universe. To Ishmael the meaning of the White Whale was ambiguous. To Ahab it was evil. To Starbuck it was a creature of nature. Both Ahab and Starbuck perished through the instrumentality of the White Whale. Ishmael survived. The present-day reader and scholar must be something of an Ishmael in his attitude toward the use of white in literature. It is something so enormous and so mysterious that only one who is ever conscious of this essential ambiguity

104 Feidelson, p. 33.
can hope to keep his head above water in his encounters with this fascinating but perplexing subject.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

From the white-armed goddesses of the earliest Greek literature through the "milkewhite lambes" of Spenser to the snow-white trunks of Robert Frost's birches, white has been important as a color element in Western literature. It is used to give beautiful effects, ethereal effects, muted effects, frozen effects. It has been used significantly as a descriptive element in the work of every well-known poet and in that of many prose writers.

The symbolic element of white is also easily discernible. Before written records or literature, white animals--the pig, the bull, the horse--were used in religious rituals. White birds, especially the dove and the swan, were used to symbolize beauty, purity, grace, peace. Some white flowers had symbolic significance--the lily, the rose. One heavenly body has vast ramifications symbolically--the moon. This symbolism then found its way into the literature. The symbolic use of white is a repeatedly useful element in the literature of the Western world in all ages and literary movements.

Undoubtedly the most intriguing use of white is the psychological. And this use is just as ancient as the
descriptive or the symbolic. This fact is made evident in the folk tales cited. Tales from mythology would yield similar evidence. The understanding which the modern science of psychology has contributed has re-awakened in the present day an understanding of elements (of which white is one) which had faded in man's awareness. This does not mean that myths and folk tales had only been exciting stories to the people who first heard them. They meant a great deal more. That is why Erich Fromm entitled his study *The Forgotten Language*—men formerly understood myths, fairy tales, folk tales, dreams, but now they are a "forgotten language."

Modern psychology is only helping modern man to "remember" in this area in which his sophistication has caused him to "forget." A sensitivity to such elements as white (and others similarly used) greatly enriches the mental and spiritual resources of man.

Psychologically, white has been shown to be a provocative element in worship (in mystic rites of the moon, in Druidic practices and others); Robert Graves would emphasize the importance of white (specifically the "White Goddess") in the production of "true poetry." Such poets as Coleridge and Keats have used the mystical power of white to evoke an imaginative response from their readers. Many
lyric poets, too many to attempt even a listing, have used white to create a "mood." The fictional writings of Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville dramatically demonstrate the psychological impact of white.

Further implications inject themselves repeatedly into the mind of the researcher. Can a "true Christian" write "true poetry" (using the formula suggested by Graves)? Is Robert Graves' premise valid? Does his own poetry bear it out? It would be fruitful to study the entire body, or at least all the important works, of a single writer and to compare them with those of another writer, as, for example, Shelley and Keats; the initial implication would seem to point to Shelley's use of white largely as a descriptive element, with his symbolic use implementing his descriptions. Keats' use of white seems mainly descriptive, although the modern critic will see more and more symbolic and psychological implications. Such possibilities and others point to so many paths that one cannot but regret "the road not taken."

This study is only a meagre beginning in the area which it concerns. The subject is fascinating, intriguing, rewarding. There has been no major study of this subject, and the sifting through of much secondary material yields comparatively little pithy comment; nearly all work in this area must be
done in the almost endless perusal of primary sources. Many literary works were scanned but laid aside in the concerns of time, space, and the necessity for narrowing the scope of the thesis. Hardly any work looked at, however, failed to yield some indication of the significance of this element of white. One thing seems evident: white has been and continues to be a significant element in the literature of the Western world.

SYLVAN MORFYDD

White Morfydd through the woods
Went on a moonlit night:
Never so pure a sight
As that, as white
White Morfydd in the woods.

White Morfydd through the woods
Moved, as a spirit might:
The cool leaves with delight
Stirred round the white
White Morfydd in the woods.

White Morfydd through the woods
Went lonely and went bright:
She was those woodlands' light,
My lost, most white,
White Morfydd in the woods.

-- Lionel Pigot Johnson (1867-1902)
APPENDIX

Synonyms for white:
alb
alba
albina
argent
ash

blanch
blank (rare)
beach
chalk(y)

hoar(y)

ivory

snow(y)
snowwhite
swanlike

Words with a related meaning, or suggestive of white:
ashen
ashy
birch

cream(y)
crystal
dove
faded
fleecy
foam(y)
froth(y)
frost(y)

ghastly
ghostly

light
lucent
lily
lotus

marble
milk(y)
mist(y)
moon

moonlight

pale
pally
pallid
pallor
pearl(y)
radiant
radiance
silver(y)
silver-white
spectre
spectral
wan
waxed

Other compounds using white:
white-cap
white-faced
white heat
white-hot
white lie
white-livered

and many others
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