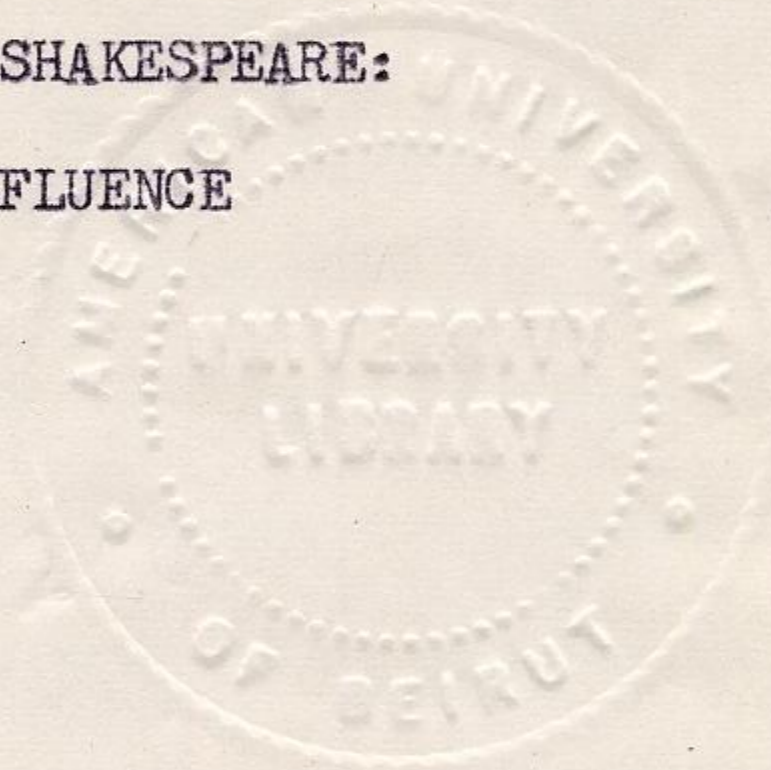


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HERMAN MELVILLE AND WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE:

A STUDY IN SOURCES AND INFLUENCE



by

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A Thesis

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PREFACE

The recognition of Herman Melville (1819-1891) as a significant world author coincided with the attempts at the beginning of the twentieth century to introduce American Literature into the curricula of several important universities in New York and New England. Thus, Melville, who was largely underestimated by academic and popular critics alike during his lifetime, owes his present popularity to a few literature professors who "discovered" masterpieces like Mardi, Moby-Dick, The Confidence Man, and Billy Budd in the 1920's. These critics also recognized, though imperfectly, that Shakespeare was a major influence on Melville's literary achievement. Later students have attempted to trace Melville's indebtedness to the Elizabethan dramatist.¹

Lewis Mumford, in his biography of Melville (1929), was one of the first to note that Melville's development as a writer was deeply affected by his rediscovery of Shakespeare's plays. But it was not until R.S. Forsythe's introduction to his edition of Pierre (1930), and G. Hugh's article which appeared in the Shakespeare Bulletin (April, 1932) that we begin to have elaborate studies of Melville's uses of Shakespeare's plays.

¹ For brief summaries of these studies see Mr. Stanley T. Williams' annotated bibliography in Eight American Authors, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1963).

An important book in this respect is C. Olson's Call Me Ishmael (1947) in which he stresses the large claims of Shakespeare on both Melville's language and thought. The book is a remarkably full study of Melville's debt to Shakespeare's King Lear. E. D. Rosenberry's Melville and the Comic Spirit (1955), on the other hand, provides a different approach to the Melville-Shakespeare relationship. It is a comparative study of Shakespearean and Melvillean humour.

However, it is mainly Melville's biographers who emphasize Shakespeare's immense influence on Melville. Two very important and interdependent works are Jay Leyda's Melville Log (1950) and Leon Howard's detailed biography, Herman Melville, which appeared in the same year. The Log is a valuable guide to students of Melville because it contains a daily record of events in Melville's life and is based on all dependable sources of information. It also notes all of Melville's numerous markings in his set of Shakespeare, which is now deposited in the Houghton Library at Harvard University.

Apart from Olson's Call Me Ishmael, in which he expanded his earlier essay in Twice-a-Year on "Lear and Moby-Dick" (1938), there have been no attempts at a detailed study of the allusions to Shakespeare's plays in Melville's works. This subject was dealt with briefly in F. O. Matthiessen's American Renaissance (1941) in the chapters about Melville, and in somewhat greater detail in Roma Rosen's unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (Northwestern University, 1962) -- "Melville's Uses of Shakespeare's Plays." But whereas

Matthiessen approaches the Melville-Shakespeare relationship from a thematic angle, Rosen attempts a summary of Shakespeare's effect on Melville's language, style and characterization. As a result her study tends to be general and conservative. By emphasizing all the works of both Shakespeare and Melville, she inevitably overlooked many important allusions.

This dissertation is a study of Shakespeare's influence on Melville during the most important years of what F. O. Matthiesen has called the "American Renaissance": 1849-1852, the period that produced his greatest masterpiece, Moby-Dick, as well as his greatest failure, Pierre. In Chapter I, I shall present the Melville-Shakespeare relationship, against the background of American literary nationalism. Chapter II is an attempt to consider every important Hamlet-Moby-Dick allusion or plot parallel, with special emphasis on those hitherto unnoticed by Melville students. In Chapter III I shall discuss the main causes for the significant failure of Pierre, especially since it follows only one year after the great Moby-Dick.

The writing of this thesis is greatly indebted to Professor Buford Jones. I wish to express my deep gratitude for all his encouragement, steady guidance and most precious help.

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CHAPTER I

SHAKESPEARE, MELVILLE AND THE NEW YORK

LITERATI

Serious literary studies of Herman Melville's works did not appear until the 1920's, a generation after his death and a full seventy years after the publication of his masterpiece, Moby-Dick. He was not unknown to his contemporaries; on the contrary, his early works, Typee (1846) and Omoo (1847), brought him quick recognition and fame. He became well known as the author of autobiographical sea adventures like Richard Henry Dana's Two Years Before the Mast (1840) and James Fenimore Cooper's The Pilot (1823). However, with the publication of his third book, Mardi (1849), his reputation as a writer began to decline. The failure of Mardi was his first disappointment. In this book, where Melville took the first step away from the autobiographical romance of adventure, the poetic allegory and the philosophic abstractions did not appeal to the public. But Mardi is interesting because it illustrates a change in Melville's development as an author. It reflects his maturing intelligence and sharp mind. Melville, who was by this time an interested reader of both Spenser and Shakespeare, was finding in their works hints of his own unclarified thoughts. Yet,

although he expresses himself in his own exaggerated version of the grotesque symbolic imagery and the suggestive nomenclature associated with the recognizable passages of allegory in Spenser's Faerie Queene,

his selection of a symbol was often imaginative and his aphoristic comments were both pointed and suggestive.¹

However, both disappointment and financial necessity combined to force him to return to the kind of narrative which had earlier made him popular.

On December 14, 1849, shortly after the publication of Redburn, his fourth novel in three years, he expressed to his friend Evert A. Duyckinck his surprise at the book's success:

I did not see your say [sic] about the book "Redburn," which to my surprise (somewhat) seems to have been favorably received. I am glad of it -- for it puts money into an empty purse. But I hope I shall never write such a book again -- Tho' when a poor devil writes with duns all around him, & looking over the back of his chair -- & perching on his pen & diving in his inkstand-like the devils about St: Anthony -- what can you expect of that poor devil? -- What but a beggarly "Redburn!" And when he attempts anything higher -- God help him & save him! for it's not with a hallow purse as with a hollow balloon -- for a hollow purse makes the poet sink -- witness "Mardi!" But we that write & print have all our books predestined-....²

In this extract we see the beginnings of the conflict within Melville between his natural inclination as a writer and his awareness of what the public wanted. Because he could not afford to ignore public taste, he struggled to check his unpopular literary impulses and keep them under control. As a practical man, he followed Redburn with White

¹ Leon Howard, Herman Melville (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1951), p. 127.

² Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman (edd.), The Letters of Herman Melville (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), pp. 95-96.

Jacket in the same year. And, in 1850, he was busy working on another book -- this time relating adventures on a "whaling voyage." On May 1st he wrote to Richard Henry Dana that he was already "half way in the work." Melville's reluctant confession in the same letter that

it will be a strange sort of book, tho', I fear; blubber is blubber you know; tho' you may get oil out of it, the poetry runs as hard as sap from a frozen maple tree; -- and to cook the thing up, one must needs throw in a little fancy, which from the nature of the thing, must be ungainly as the grambols of the whales themselves. Yet I mean to give the truth of the thing, 'spite of this,³

clearly shows that he intended the book to be another sea adventure. By August, 1850, this book was "mostly done." Duyckinck wrote, from Pittsfield, to his brother George,

Melville has a new book mostly done -- a romantic fanciful and literal and most enjoyable presentment of the Whale Fishery.⁴

However, the year passed and the book was not finished. It was not until one year later that this book, Moby-Dick, was published -- in London on October 18, 1851, and in New York about four weeks later. The reaction it aroused is well known. Moby-Dick, which is now considered Melville's masterpiece, was universally condemned. The reason for its failure was due mainly to Melville's confusion of literary genres. The book is, certainly, no simple "romance of

³ Letters, p. 108.

⁴ Howard, p. 158.

adventure" as Melville claimed it to be in his letter to Richard Bentley, on June 27, 1850.⁵ It is a novel which presents the full force of Melville's tragic vision of man's unceasing struggle in an evil and indifferent universe.

The year which Melville spent in finishing his "new book" seems to have been a crucial period in his life. His experience and development during this time had such an effect on his intended "romance of adventure" that the book, as we have it now, is one "broiled in hell fire" and whose secret motto is "Ego non babtizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli." Melville himself wrote to Nathaniel Hawthorne, in June [1?], 1851, only a few months before the publication of Moby-Dick:

Until I was twenty-five, I had no development at all. From my twenty-fifth year I date my life. Three weeks have scarcely passed, at any time between then and now, that I have not unfolded within myself. But I feel that I am now come to the inmost leaf of the bulb,⁶ and that shortly the flower must fall to the mould.

Moby-Dick, the book Melville wrote during this period, reflects this change in its author. However, the book itself seems to have undergone a change, or rather a second growth, during the process of its composition. Internal evidence in Moby-Dick points out that Melville must have started deviating from his original plan in writing this book sometime around the middle of August, 1850. An examination of

⁵ Letters, p. 190.

⁶ Letters, p. 130.

the sources Melville used shows that, in addition to the various books he had already bought and borrowed by June 1850, he had also ordered a copy of Thomas Beale's The Natural History of the Sperm Whale (London, 1859). Because this book had to be imported from England, it did not arrive until July 10, 1850, shortly before Melville's departure for Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Leon Howard, in his biography of Melville, claims, on the basis of internal evidence that Melville

did not begin to draw regularly upon Beale and his other sources of information until he reached chapter thirty-two, entitled 'Cetology!'⁷

Howard states that of the seventy-four chapters which represent the central section of Moby-Dick all but twenty-two contain material based on published sources of information. Furthermore, some of the twenty-two chapters are so linked with the chapters echoing Beale that they must have been written after Melville received his copy of Beale's book. And since Chapter XLI, "Moby-Dick," is the first chapter to contain information directly derived from Beale, the book's second growth must have begun with this chapter. But this chapter is very closely linked with Chapter XXXVI, "The Quarter-Deck," which is the first of the dramatic chapters in the central section of the book. For, even though these two chapters are separated by four intervening chapters, the continuity of narration strongly suggests that these two were "conceived together and written

⁷ Howard, p. 162.

successively."⁸ In Chapter XXXVI, when Ahab announces the search, and thus reveals the real purpose of the voyage, we hear of Moby-Dick for the first time. Chapter XLI offers parallel explanations concerning Ahab's attitude to Moby-Dick. Together these two chapters are crucial in the interpretation of Ahab's tragedy. However, because of the direct borrowing from Beale's Natural History in Chapter XLI, this chapter could not have possibly been written before July 10, 1850. Since both chapters XXXVI and XLI are very essential to the development of the narrative they could not have been later insertions;⁹ we can assume that when he reached this section of the book, Melville had a different vision of his literary work.

What caused this change in Moby-Dick may be inferred from a consideration of Melville's experiences during this crucial period in his life. For, after the middle of June, the strain of writing a book while "shut up all day" in his room began to show on him. He became so exhausted, both physically and mentally, that he could no longer stand the conditions of his crowded house on Fourth Avenue. By the end of July, he could endure it no more. Feeling the need for some rest he decided to spend the remaining part of summer in the country, in the midst of the Berkshire Mountains of eastern Massachusetts. So he moved with his family to Pittsfield. Having been persuaded to spend a few days with Melville and his family at Arrow Head, Evert Duyckinck and Cornelius Mathews arrived on August 2nd,

⁸ Ibid., p. 167.

⁹ Ibid., p. 167.

and stayed for ten days. These turbulently busy days were to influence, in a variety of ways, the course of Melville's literary career; an especially significant event occurred on August 5. David Dudley Field organized a party to climb up Monument Mountain, which had been the subject a few decades earlier of William Cullen Bryant's famous romantic poem. The group included Melville, Duyckinck, Mathews, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, and several other literary figures. It was a combination of New York and New England literati and critics. Thus, it was inevitable for them to get involved in an argument touching a subject most immediate to them then -- the controversy, between the New Yorkers and the New Englanders, about American literary nationalism, which was a conscious attempt to create a unique, national literature. Melville, who sided with Mathews' defense of American "genius" against Dr. Holmes' assertions of English superiority, must have been deeply stirred by this incident. Dr. Holmes' ironic ridicule of the Americanists, "that in gigantic America within twenty years man would be sixteen feet high" and intellectual in proportion."¹⁰ must have struck a sensitive cord in Melville. This is clearly shown in the essay he wrote a few days later, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," which was published in Duyckinck's magazine, The Literary World, in two installments, on August 17 and 24.

¹⁰ Quoted in Perry Miller, The Raven and the Whale (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1956), p. 284.

Melville, who had met Hawthorne for the first time during this trip, was so impressed with him, as well as with his book Mosses from an Old Manse, which he read a few days later, that he felt a strong urge to tell the world what a great literary genius America had in Hawthorne. In this essay, Melville tried, as it were, to hit two birds with the same stone -- to praise Hawthorne, and to use him as an example in defending the cause of American literary nationalism. The fact that Hawthorne himself was a New Englander did not matter; Melville's only concern was that in praising Hawthorne he was praising an American "genius":

Call him an American, and have done; for you cannot say a nobler thing of him.¹¹

It is significant that Melville's essay did not appear under his own name. The reason probably was that he wanted to hide the fact that it was written by one of the Young Americans -- the literary club whose members believed in the cause of native American "genius," and the need for America to create and encourage a unique, national literature independent of England. Melville must have thought that his essay would be better received by the public if they thought it to be written by an unbiased person. So, he claimed himself to be a "Virginian spending July in Vermont." Why a "Virginian"? No explanation has ever been offered by students of American literature. However, one of Hawthorne's severest critics was a Virginian -- Edgar

¹¹ Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and Hiss Mosses," in The Portable Melville, ed. Jay Jeyda (New York: The Viking Press, 1952), p. 413.

Allan Poe. The second version of his review on Hawthorne's Twice-Told Tales, published in Godey's Lady's Book in November, 1847, is one of the bitterest attacks Hawthorne ever received. It is very probable that Melville had this particular essay in mind when he wrote his praise of Hawthorne. Evert Duyckinck had already praised Hawthorne, as early as May, 1841, in the Arcturus. But Melville with all his admiration for the author of the Mosses, sounds rather over-enthusiastic. This strongly suggests that he was actually hitting back at Hawthorne's critics, and in particular at Poe. Poe's opinion of Hawthorne, however, seems to have undergone a remarkable change. This movement from one extreme to the other is quite typical of Poe's practice as a critic, since he often contradicts himself. Poe's first review of Twice-Told Tales was published in Graham's Magazine, in May, 1842. Poe in his revision of this review, in 1847, ignores the fact that it was he who had announced, only five years ago:

We know of few compositions which the critics can more honestly commend than these "Twice-Told Tales." As Americans, we feel proud of the book."

In his new version, he attacks Hawthorne for the very points he had praised in his earlier essay. He criticizes him for his "want of general originality" and for his being too fond of allegory. He finds him monotonous because of the pervading tone of quietude and repose in his writing. Yet, even though he does not approve of

¹² Edgar Allan Poe, "Twice-Told Tales," in Edgar Allan Poe, ed. Margaret Alterton and Hardin Craig (New York: Hill and Wang, Inc., 1962), p. 361.

Hawthorne's "treating all his subjects in a similar tone of dreamy innuendo," he confesses that Hawthorne "evinces extraordinary genius having no rival either in America or elsewhere."¹³ Strong though it is, this statement is but an echo of Poe's first enthusiastic review, an echo which is quickly stifled by the severe attacks that follow.

Melville, on the other hand, meeting Hawthorne at a crucial point in his own life, and being very impressed with his Mosses, especially with the vision of life as revealed in those tales, could not refrain from expressing his enthusiastic admiration for the "great deep intellect" of this "most excellent Man of Mosses." He praises the prevailing tone of "repose" in these tales as an effect which seems to cast a spell on the reader. His emphasis on this element of "repose"¹⁴ could be the result of his trying to justify and defend Hawthorne against Poe's criticism of this very element in his writing. Poe attacks the critics of the

¹³ Edgar Allan Poe, "Twice-Told Tales," in Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe, ed. Edward H. Davidson (Boston: The Riverside Press, 1956), p. 440.

¹⁴ The word "repose," of course, is a common term in the Romantic aesthetic of the sublime, beautiful, and picturesque. But in America, Melville thought, it was appropriated by the superficial transcendentalist "yea-sayers" like Bryant, Thomas Cole, and even Thoreau and Emerson, who refused to see the evil in human life and the unkindness of nature. See Angus Fletcher, Allegory (New York: Cornell University Press, 1964), pp. 245-268; Charles L. Sanford, "The Concept of the Sublime in the Works of Thomas Cole and William Cullen Bryant," American Literature, XXVIII (January, 1957), 434-448; and Herman Melville's Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne (April 16?, 1851), Letters, p. 125: "For all men who say yes, lie...."

North American Review because he believes that they are not sufficiently concerned about literary originality.

"Give us quietude," they say. Opening their mouths with proper caution they sigh forth the word "Repose."¹⁵

He denies that Hawthorne is original:

The fact is, that if Mr. Hawthorne were really original, he could not fail of making himself felt by the public. But the fact is, he is not original in any sense,¹⁶

and adds:

The author who, after the manner of the North Americans, is merely at all times quiet, is, of course, upon most occasions, merely silly, or stupid. . . .¹⁷

But Melville, who believes that Hawthorne's melancholy rests "all over him" like an "Indian-summer," writes,

But it is the least part of genius that attracts admiration. Where Hawthorne is known he seems to be deemed a pleasant writer, with a pleasant style -- a sequestered, harmless man, from whom any deep and mighty thing would hardly be anticipated: a man who means no meanings.¹⁸

That Melville had Poe's remarks in mind is suggested by the fact that the metaphor of the "Indian-summer," which Melville uses in the previous lines and which he repeats four paragraphs later, is found in Poe's review when he talks of the "Indian-summer sunshine of his Wakefields and Little Annie's Rambles."¹⁹ So Melville, who

¹⁵ Poe, "Twice-Told Tales" (1847), p. 442.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 449.

¹⁸ "Hawthorne and His Mosses," pp. 404-5.

¹⁹ Poe, "Twice-Told Tales" (1847), p. 449.

felt that "This Hawthorne has dropped germinous seeds into my soul,"²⁰ takes upon himself the task of defending Hawthorne's "great deep intellect" against the charge of his being "silly," in other words, that "he means no meaning."

You may be witched by his sunlight, transported by the bright gildings in the skies he builds over you, but there is the blackness of darkness beyond; and even his bright gildings but fringe and play upon the edges of thunder-clouds -- In one word, the world is mistaken in this Nathaniel Hawthorne.²¹

Finding in Hawthorne a deep intelligence and a penetrating awareness of the evil in the heart of man as well as in the nature of the universe, he confesses,

Now it is that blackness in Hawthorne, of which I have spoken, that so fixes and fascinates me.²²

Another great genius whose tragic vision was having a profound influence on Melville during this period was Shakespeare. Melville's obsession with the dramatist, an obsession which had a deep effect on his literary career, was mainly because he was greatly impressed with the "blackness" which "furnishes the infinite obscure of his background,"

that background against which Shakespeare plays his grandest conceits, the things that have made for Shakespeare his loftiest but most circumscribed renown, as the profoundest of thinkers.²³

²⁰ "Hawthorne and His Mosses," p. 417.

²¹ Ibid., p. 406.

²² Ibid., p. 407.

²³ Ibid.

By this time, Melville was obviously a fervent admirer of Shakespeare. Only a year before, on February 4th, 1849, he had written a letter to his friend Evert Duyckinck in which he enthusiastically praised the "divine William,"

I fancy that this moment Shakespeare in heaven ranks with Gabriel Raphael and Michael. And if another Messiah ever comes 'twill be in Shakespeare's person.²⁴

Such an announcement, made to the leader of the Young America Group, and coming from one of them, must have been quite unwelcome to Duyckinck. So, on March 3, Melville, in another letter to Duyckinck, writes rather apologetically,

To one of your habits of thought, I confess that in my last, I seemed, but only seemed irreverent. And do not think, my boy, that because I, impulsively broke forth in jubilations over Shakespeare, that, therefore, I am of the number of the snoobs who burn their tuns of rancid fat at his shrine. No, I would stand afar off alone, burn pure Palm oil, the product of some overtopping trunk.²⁵

Melville, is here assuring Duyckinck and confirming to him his loyalty to the objectives and beliefs of Young America. For, though an ardent admirer of Shakespeare, and Shakespeare's literary achievement, Melville was too ambitious to be satisfied with the role of a mere imitator. More than a year later, in his essay on Hawthorne, he vehemently attacks the New Englanders' point of view, and calls for the support of American genius:

²⁴ Letters, p. 77.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 79.

Let America then prize and cherish her writers; yea, let her glorify them. They are not so many in number as to exhaust her good will. And while she had good kith and kin of her own, to take to her bosom, let her not lavish her embraces upon the household of an alien. For believe it or not, England, after all, is, in many things, an alien to us...., let America first praise mediocrity even, in her own children, before she praises... the best excellence in the children of any other land. Let her own authors, I say, have the priority of appreciation.²⁶

Thus, though confessing his great admiration for Shakespeare, whom he believes to be one of the "masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth," Melville denies his being "unapproachable."²⁷ Reproaching the New Englanders' "absolute and unconditional adoration of Shakespeare," he protests,

Intolerance has come to exist in this matter. You must believe in Shakespeare's unapproachability, or quit the country. But what sort of a belief is this for an America, a man who is bound to carry republican progressiveness into Literature, as well as into Life? Believe me, my friends, that men not very inferior to Shakespeare are this day being born on the banks of the Ohio.²⁸

Melville was aware that he will be criticized for comparing Hawthorne to Shakespeare, but he defends his case,

Now, I do not say that Nathaniel of Salem is greater than William of Avon, or as great. But the difference between the two men is by no means immeasurable. Not a very great deal more, and Nathaniel were verily William.

²⁶ "Hawthorne and His Mosses," pp. 411-412.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 408.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 409-410.

This, too, I mean-that if Shakespeare has not been equaled, give the world time, and he is sure to be surpassed in one hemisphere or the other.²⁹

The corrected manuscript of this essay, which survives among Duyckinck's papers, shows that Melville had originally written that Shakespeare would certainly be surpassed by an American. The somewhat milder tone of the corrections clearly indicates an effort to cover up the intensity of Melville's patriotic indignation while writing this essay.

Most of the changes are merely verbal, but the major ones are all of a single tendency: they cut down or restrain the exuberant nationalism of the draft.³⁰

However, Melville's reproach to the American public is evident in his recommendation of Hawthorne, a recommendation which, strangely enough, echoes Dr. Johnson's praise of a very famous Shakespearean character. Dr. Johnson, in his 1765 Edition of Shakespeare (IV, 355-6), exclaims,

But Falstaff unimitated, unimitable Falstaff, how shall I describe thee?³¹

Melville having experienced failure and disappointment himself sympathizes with Hawthorne. He knows only too well that no writer can achieve any literary merit without an encouraging public to back him up. Mardi's hostile reception had left a scar in Melville's soul.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 410.

³⁰ Miller, The Raven and the Whale, p. 285.

³¹ In Shakespeare Criticism: A Selection 1623-1840, ed. D. Nichol Smith (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 117.

And now, my countrymen, as an excellent author, of your own flesh and blood -- an unimitating, and perhaps, in his way, an inimitable man -- whom better can I commend to you, in the first place, than Nathaniel Hawthorne. He is one of the new and far better generation of your writers.... Give not over to future generations the glad duty of acknowledging him for what he is. Take that joy to yourself, in your own generation; and so shall he feel those grateful impulses in him that may possibly prompt him to the full flower of some greater achievement in your eyes. And by confessing him, you thereby confess others; you brace the whole brotherhood.³²

Melville, by defending Hawthorne, is defending the cause of all American authors, himself included. He is defending all their hopes and ambitions which were being stifled by the blind admiration for foreign models. While denying the unapproachability of Shakespeare, Melville, however, does not underestimate the latter's greatness. What he calls for is an unprejudiced public, who is free enough to recognize and welcome an American Shakespeare, when he appears.

³² "Hawthorne and His Mosses," p. 414.

CHAPTER II

MOBY-DICK AND HAMLET

Hamlet. Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?

Polonius. By th' mass and 'tis, like a camel indeed.

Hamlet. Methinks it is like a weasel.

Polonius. It is backed like weasel.

Hamlet. Or, like a whale?

Polonius. Very like a whale. (III, ii.)

In addition to Shakespeare, Melville scholars have traced two other main influences on his work -- Milton and the Bible. Of the three, the influence of Shakespeare is generally agreed to be paramount. F. O. Matthiessen says Melville's

possession by Shakespeare went far beyond all other influences . . . a man of thirty awakening to his full strength through the challenge of the most abundant imagination in history.¹

In February, 1849, Melville was able to devote himself to a careful study of Shakespeare's plays. For it was then that he obtained his copy of the Hilliard Gray (Boston, 1836) set of the plays, the "glorious edition" in large type. His excited reaction to them is best illustrated by an extract from the letter he wrote to his friend Evert A. Duyckinck from Boston on February 4th, 1849,

Dolt & ass that I am I have lived more than 29 years, & until a few days ago, never made close acquaintance with the divine William. Ah, he's full of sermons-on-the-mount, and gentle, aye, almost as Jesus. I take such men to be inspired.²

¹ F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 424.

² Letters, p. 76.

This exuberant praise reflects Melville's new but strong admiration for Shakespeare. He was especially impressed by the tragedies, for he found in them a deep understanding of human nature and a sharp awareness of the terrifying dualism in the world. Melville's markings in his copies of the Hilliard Gray set are significant clues to scholars as they indicate the passages which must have impressed and influenced him most.

Moby-Dick "has been widely recognized as the most fertile field for critics to trace the impact of Shakespeare on Melville's writing."³ This is because Melville's reading of Shakespeare's plays before and during the time he wrote Moby-Dick, affected him profoundly. However, I shall not go as far as F. O. Matthiessen in assuming that "you find fragments of Shakespeare's language on almost every page." But I agree with him that we could trace numerous "kaleidoscopic variations of Shakespeare's patterns throughout this book."⁴ In this Chapter I shall deal with the influence of only one play of Shakespeare's -- Hamlet -- on Moby-Dick, and point out such parallels and echoes as I believe to be found in its theme, structure, and characterization.

Melville's tragic vision, as revealed in Moby-Dick, is impressive because, like Shakespeare, it reflects a sharp awareness of the evil

³ Roma Rosen, "Melville's Uses of Shakespeare's Plays" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, 1962), p. 92.

⁴ Matthiessen, p. 424.

lurking in the universe. The world of Moby-Dick is a cruel impersonal world where man fears that he is a mere accident, like one of Ahab's rare tears dropped into the sea. But Ahab bears a livid scar on his brow; it is a mark of sorrow, for,

the gods themselves are not forever glad. The ineffaceable, sad birthmark in the brow of man, is but the stamp of sorrow in the signers.⁵

This is the "vicious mole of nature" that Hamlet talks about in one of his soliloquies:

So, oft it chances in particular men,
That for some vicious mole of nature in them,
As in their birth, wherein they are not guilty
(Since nature cannot choose his origin),
By the o'ergrowth of some complexion,
Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason,
Or by some habit, that too much o'er-leavens
The form of plausible manners -- that these men,
Carrying I say the stamp of one defect,
Being nature's livery, or fortune's star,
Her virtues else be they as pure as grace,
As infinite as man may undergo,
Shall in the general censure take corruption
From that particular fault⁶

Thus, Ahab, from the beginning, is branded for his tragic end, and is fated for destruction.

On the whole, the allusions to Hamlet in Moby-Dick are of two kinds -- conscious and unconscious. The reader often encounters fragments of Hamlet scattered here and there. Yet, one cannot help

⁵ Herman Melville, Moby-Dick (New York: Hendricks House, Inc., 1952), p. 461.

⁶ Hamlet, I. iv. 23-36. Cambridge Edition, ed. John Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957).

feeling that, in many of these, Melville seems to be unconsciously echoing statements and ideas from Hamlet which had affected him and left traces on his imagination. In such cases the borrowed material seems to have been fused into Melville's own thought.

Several allusions to Hamlet's soliloquies can be traced in Ishmael's meditations. Many of them are reflections on death, the theme of Hamlet's most famous soliloquy: "To be, or not to be." Since like Hamlet, Ishmael was naturally inclined to meditation, his taking a voyage on a whaling ship intensified his preoccupation with death:

there is death in this business of whaling --
a speechlessly quick chaotic bundling of a man
into Eternity.⁷

His description of death as "a launching into the region of the strange Untried,"⁸ is an echo of Hamlet's "undiscovered country" from whose "bourn/No traveller returns."⁹

In Chapter VII, "The Chapel," Ishmael enters a chapel where the sight of "several marble tablets, with black borders, masoned into the wall on either side of the pulpit," in the memory of many dead sailors, starts him off on a long reflection on death. In this same chapter, there is strong evidence that Melville had

⁷ Moby-Dick, p. 36.

⁸ Ibid., p. 481.

⁹ Hamlet, III. i. 79-80.

Hamlet still fresh in his mind. His description of the women present as wearing "the countenance if not the trappings of some unceasing grief,"¹⁰ seems to be a direct reference to Hamlet:

These but the trappings and suits of woe.¹¹

One paragraph later when Ishmael inquires:

In what census of living creatures, the dead of mankind are included; why it is that a universal proverb says of them, that they tell no tales, though containing more secrets than the Godwin Sands!¹²

Melville is surely thinking of the ghost in Hamlet. The ghost of Hamlet's father, being one of the "dead of mankind," knows all that there is to know about the kingdom of the dead. But, he is "forbid to tell the secrets of his prison house."¹³ Furthermore, a direct reference to the ghost in Hamlet is found in a footnote. Ishmael, describing an albatross, writes, "it uttered cries, as some King's ghost in supernatural distress."¹⁴ Hamlet's remarks to his father's ghost are clearly attempts to comfort the latter in his great distress.¹⁵

Reflections on Man is another theme which can be traced in

¹⁰ Moby-Dick, p. 35.

¹¹ Hamlet, I. ii. 86.

¹² Moby-Dick, pp. 35-36.

¹³ Hamlet, I. v. 13.

¹⁴ Moby-Dick, p. 187.

¹⁵ Hamlet, I. v.

Hamlet's soliloquies and Ishmael's meditations. Ishmael expresses the same admiration for:

What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving, how express and admirable in action, how like an angel in apprehension, how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals¹⁶

The passage I am referring to, in Moby-Dick, is in Chapter XXVI, "Knights and Squires,"

Man, in the ideal, is so noble and so sparkling, such a grand and glowing creature¹⁷

Melville's phrase echoes Hamlet's "how like angel . . . , how like a god." Another allusion to the same passage in Hamlet is found in Chapter CVII, "The Carpenter," where Ishmael says:

Take high abstracted man alone; and he seems a wonder, a grandeur, and a woe.¹⁸

In this remark there is a touch of melancholy which is lacking in the first quotation. The word "woe" echoes the pessimism in Hamlet's following remark,

and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust?¹⁹

There has been a lot of dispute concerning Moby-Dick as a

¹⁶ Ibid, II. ii, 307-311.

¹⁷ Moby-Dick, p. 114.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 462.

¹⁹ Hamlet, II. ii, 311-312.

literary work -- whether to call it a novel, an epic or a romance. But, regardless of what stand one takes in relation to this problem, one cannot but admit that Moby-Dick, in many of its aspects, is a dramatic work. This is clearly illustrated by several chapters which are in fact dramatic scenes, with stage directions, dramatis personae, and dialogue. It is in such chapters that Melville's conscious echoes from Hamlet are most obvious.

The first of these chapters is chapter XXXVI, "The Quarter-Deck," in which Ahab emerges as a Hamlet figure. Melville's debt to Shakespeare, in this chapter, can be best described in Matthiessen's words:

A more effective since less labored derivation adds intensity to the moment when Ahab pledges the crew to his purpose in the harpoon-cups. For he also makes the three mates cross their lances before him, and seizes them at their axis, "meanwhile glancing intently from Starbuck to Stubb, from Stubb to Flask." The cellarage scene when Hamlet compelled Horatio and Marcellus to swear on his sword was operating on the construction here. This is also the juncture when Fedallah's spectral laugh is heard from the hold, a counterpart of Hamlet's father's ghost. An oddly transformed allusion, which shows again how deeply Shakespeare's words had entered into Melville's own unconscious is added by Ahab. He breaks off to say to the boy who has brought the grog, in a recombination of some of Hamlet's remarks to the Ghost: "Ha! boy, come back? bad pennies come not sooner."²⁰

In this last remark the allusion, which Matthiessen does not specify, is to Hamlet, I. v. 150, where, Hamlet, hearing the ghost's voice echoing from the cellarage, tells him,

²⁰ Matthiessen, p. 432.

Ha, ha boy! sayst thou so? art thou there,
truepenny?²¹

Chapter CVIII, "Ahab and the Carpenter," is another instance of a dramatic chapter where Melville, once again, draws directly upon Shakespeare. It begins with stage directions, which are used throughout. However, it is evident from the preceding chapter, "The Carpenter," that Melville is conceiving this episode in terms of a dramatic scene. The carpenter, who comes "in person on the stage," is presented as a character whose "one grand stage where he enacted all his various parts so manifold, was his vice-bench."²² It corresponds to the graveyard scene in Hamlet²³ -- Hamlet's encounter with the gravedigger. In this chapter, Melville presents this character as a man "prepared at all points, and alike indifferent and without respect in all."²⁴ He tells us about his "heartlessness," his "wheezing humorousness, not unstreaked now and then with a certain grizzled wittiness."²⁵ We also know that he is given to soliloquizing most of the time. Thus, this character is parallel to the Shakespearean clown grave-digger who, likewise, expresses a similar kind of irreverent humour in both his speeches and soliloquies. Moreover, both of these minor characters, the carpenter and the clown, have the

²¹ Hamlet, I. v. 150.

²² See Matthiessen, p. 432.

²³ Hamlet, V. i.

²⁴ Moby-Dick, p. 463.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 464.

same function in relation to the major character: by providing a contrast to him, they shed more light upon his character. Matthiessen and Rosen were able to trace several allusions to the graveyard scene in this chapter. However, although they are aware that both the carpenter and the clown act as a foil to the major character, they miss one important difference. Shakespeare's humour in this scene in Hamlet is much lighter than its parallel in Moby-Dick. This is due to the fact that Shakespeare intended this scene as a comic relief from the tension of the play. Whereas there is no such an attempt on Melville's part. His only obvious intention in presenting the carpenter is to make his hero more impressive by contrast to the mediocre character of the ship's carpenter.

The carpenter's speeches, as well as Ahab's, have several allusions to the corresponding scene in Hamlet. The carpenter considers the various kinds of "buckskin legs and calves legs." He rejects them because, "they soak water, they do." The gravedigger too, mentions calves while talking to Hamlet. But the allusion here is to the gravedigger's remark that, "A tanner will last nine year," because "his hide is so tanned with his trade that a' will keep out water a great while." When Ahab tells the carpenter, "an extremely gentlemanlike sort of business thou art in here carpenter," the allusion is to the clown's comment that "there is no ancient gentlemen but gardeners, ditchers and grave-makers," though, the clown in Hamlet admits that a grave-maker "builds stronger than a mason, a shipwright, or a carpenter." Ahab's remark, "would'st thou rather

work in clay?" and the carpenter's answer, "Clay? clay, sir? that's mud, we leave clay to ditchers sir," recalls the gravedigger's refrain:

O, a pit of clay for to be made
For such a guest is meet.

The word "ditchers" is surely suggested by the Clown's previous speech.

Another allusion to Hamlet in this chapter is in the carpenter's remark to Ahab,

"Bone is rather dusty, Sir."

Ahab replies,

"Take the hint, then; and when thou art dead,
never bury thyself under living people's noses."²⁶

The allusion here is to Hamlet's answer to Claudius' inquiry about Polonius:

But if indeed you find him not within this
month, you shall nose him as you go up the stairs into
the lobby.²⁷

A direct reference to the gravedigger in Hamlet is found in another Chapter CXXVII, "The Deck." When Ahab, finding the carpenter busy working silently on Ishmael's coffin, comments that

"the grave-digger in the play sings, spade in
hand. Dost thou never?"²⁸

there remains no doubt in our minds that Melville in the character of his carpenter draws directly upon that of the clown in Hamlet.

²⁶ Moby-Dick, p. 467.

²⁷ Hamlet, IV. iii, 34-36.

²⁸ Moby-Dick, p. 519.

Another scene from Hamlet which Melville takes over and reproduces in his own way is the one Ophelia describes to her father,

My lord, as I was sewing in my closet,
Lord Hamlet with his doublet all unbraced,
No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,
Ungart'ed and down-gyved to his ankle,
Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,
And with a look so piteous in purport
As if he had been loosed out of hell
To speak of horrors.²⁹

This description of the prince is parodied by Melville in Chapter CII, "A Bower in the Arsacides," where Ishmael takes upon himself the task of dissecting the Sperm Whale:

Hitherto, in descriptively treating of the Sperm Whale, I have chiefly dwelt upon the marvels of his outer aspect; or separately and in detail upon some few interior structural features. But to a large and thorough sweeping comprehension of him, it behooves me now to unbutton him still further, and untagging the points of his hose, unbuckling his garters, and casting loose the hooks and the eyes of the joints of his innermost bones, set him before you in his ultimatum; that is to say, in his unconditional skeleton.³⁰

Besides this humorous reference to Hamlet, Melville makes another allusion to the same scene in Chapter XLIV, "The Chart," but this time with a different purpose in mind -- to make more impressive his description of Ahab's intolerable nightmares:

when this hell in himself yawned beneath him,
a wild cry would be heard through the ship; and
with glaring eyes Ahab would burst from his state
room, as though escaping from a bed that was on fire.

²⁹ Hamlet, II. i. 74-81.

³⁰ Moby-Dick, p. 445.

Yet these, perhaps, instead of being the unsuppressable symptoms of some latent weakness, or fright at his own resolve, were but the plainest tokens of its intensity. For, at such times, crazy Ahab, the scheming, unappeasedly steadfast hunter of the White Whale; this Ahab that had gone to his hammock, was not the agent that so caused him to burst from it in horror again.³¹

That Melville had Ophelia's speech in mind while drawing this passage is evident in his use of certain words and phrases which correspond to the passage referred to in Hamlet. The words "hell" and "horror" are found in both passages. The "unsuppressable symptoms of some latent weakness, or fright at his own resolve" echoes Hamlet's agitated condition with "his knees knocking each other." The word "crazy" is reminiscent of Polonius' inquiry:

Mad for thy love?

A further parallel between the two descriptions is that both of them draw attention to the hysterical look of the character described. Ahab's "glaring eyes" are as impressive as Hamlet's "look which is so piteous in purport."

An obvious allusion to a Shakespearean scene is found in Chapter CXXIII, "The Musket"³² -- where Starbuck considers shooting his dark monomaniac captain. With a Hamlet-like hesitation, he pauses at the cabin door with the "loaded musket's end," placed against it. This is exactly parallel to Act III, Scene iii, in Hamlet, where Hamlet, catching sight of Claudius praying alone, pauses to consider

³¹ Ibid., pp. 199-200.

³² Ibid., p. 505.

whether to murder him then or not. The dramatic effect of this scene, in Moby-Dick, is enriched by the overtones of significance which spring to the reader's mind once he becomes aware of the existing analogy. Just as Hamlet by killing Claudius would remove the direct cause for the "something rotten in the state of Denmark," similarly, by murdering Ahab, Starbuck would save the ship and the crew from the inevitable doom awaiting them. After a long hesitation in which they reason out the situations, both Hamlet and Starbuck refrain from performing the murder. However, Starbuck's reason for this is quite different from Hamlet's. Starbuck is too prudent a man to shoot Ahab. His act is an illustration of Hamlet's remark that "conscience does make cowards of us all."³³ Whereas Hamlet's reason for delaying his act of vengeance is much more horrifying: he intends to kill Claudius at his most sinful moment in order to assure his eternal damnation.

Throughout Moby-Dick, the Shakespearean influence on the character of Starbuck operates on two levels. He is a Horatio figure, at the same time he has many traits in common with Hamlet. In his relationship with Ahab, we are chiefly reminded of the similar relationship between Horatio and Hamlet. Both Starbuck and Horatio are honest, steadfast men. In Hamlet, Horatio is the only person whom the prince of Denmark truly trusts:

³³ Hamlet, III. i. 83.

Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice,
And could of men distinguish her elections,
Sh' hath sealed thee for herself, for thou hast been
As one in suff'ring all that suffers nothing,
A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards
Hast ta'em with equal thanks; and blest are those
Whose blood and judgement are so well co-medled,
That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger
To sound what stop she please: give me that man
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
In my heart's core, aye in my heart of heart,
As I do thee.³⁴

Likewise, Starbuck is the only one among the crew whom the captain has confidence in. When Ahab decides to be hoisted up the main mast, it is to Starbuck that he turns. Handing the rope to him, he says,

"Take the rope, Sir -- I give it into thy hands,
Starbuck."³⁵

By this act, Ahab shows that he entrusts him even with his life.

Both Horatio and Starbuck represent the voice of common sense and reason. When Hamlet insists on following the ghost, Horatio repeatedly implores him, "Do not my lord," and points out the hazards involved in doing so. In Moby-Dick, it is Starbuck who, time and again, pleads with Ahab to give up his pursuit of the White Whale. Thus, Horatio's moving sentence, about his dying prince,

Now cracks a noble heart,³⁶

is echoed with emotive force in Starbuck's words,

³⁴ Ibid., III. ii. 61-72.

³⁵ Moby-Dick, p. 529.

³⁶ Hamlet, V. ii. 357.

"Oh, my Captain, my Captain! -- noble soul!
grand old heart, after all!"³⁷

However, when we see Starbuck hesitating outside Ahab's cabin, with the musket in his hand, suddenly there arises before us the image of Hamlet. To begin with, the clown in Hamlet tells the prince that he became a gravedigger "that very day that young Hamlet was born." Since he later adds,

I have been sexton here man and boy
thirty years,³⁸

we conclude that Hamlet must be thirty years old. Starbuck too is the same age as Hamlet. He is presented as a courageous and steadfast man. Yet,

for all his hardy sobriety and fortitude, there were certain qualities in him which at times affected, and in some cases seemed well nigh to overbalance all the rest. Uncommonly conscientious for a seaman, and endowed with a deep natural reverence, the wild watery loneliness of his life did strongly incline him to superstition; but to that sort of supersition which in some organizations seems rather to spring, somehow, from intelligence than from ignorance. Outward portents and inward presentiments were his.³⁹

This description of the Pequod chief mate reminds us of:

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought.⁴⁰

³⁷ Moby-Dick, p. 535.

³⁸ Hamlet, V. i. 156-157.

³⁹ Moby-Dick, p. 112.

⁴⁰ Hamlet, III. i. 83-85.

Both Hamlet and Starbuck suffer from such a defect, or tragic flaw. They are men of thought rather than action; and it is this which causes them to be superstitious. In this respect, Melville's presentation of Starbuck reveals a Coleridgean view of Hamlet, since being superstitious he is inclined to look "upon external things as hieroglyphics." Just as Hamlet takes his father's ghost to be a revelation foreboding evil, and indicating that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark,"⁴¹ similarly, a "white ghost," the Squid, this "unearthly . . . , chance-like apparition of life" fills Starbuck's heart with misgivings. Like most Whalemens, he believes that it is a bad omen, a portent of disasters to come:

"The great live Squid, which, they say, few whale-ships ever beheld, and returned to their ports to tell of it."⁴²

Starbuck's apprehension is emphasised by the allusion here to

the undiscovered country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns⁴³

Other allusions to Hamlet occur in Chapter XXXVIII, "Dusk."

Starbuck's bitter protest that he has "to obey rebelling," clearly marks him as a Hamlet figure in this role. "A burst of revelry from the fore-castle," supports this. We see in him another version of the sad rebelling prince of Denmark standing on the battlements

⁴¹ Ibid., I. iv. 90.

⁴² Moby-Dick, p. 276.

⁴³ Hamlet, III. i. 79-80.

and hearing a "flourish of trumpets" and "ordnance shot off" in the distance:

The king doth wake to-night and takes his rouse,
Keeps wassail and the swagg'ring upspring reels:
And as he drains his draughts of Rhenish down,
The kettle-drum and trumpet thus bray out
The triumph of his pledge.⁴⁴

Furthermore, the following two dramatic chapters, "First Night-Watch" and "Midnight, Forecastle," with all the drinking and merry-making in them, seem to be an exaggeration of the revelry theme in Hamlet.

Although Melville's presentation of Starbuck echoes many Shakespearean lines, it is Ahab who is the character most indebted to Shakespearean models. His dramatic soliloquies are enriched by numerous allusions to the speeches of various Shakespearean tragic heroes. Even as early as Ahab's first appearance on the deck of the Pequod we have hints that Melville is drawing upon Hamlet's character. Describing this gloomy captain, Melville uses an image which was probably suggested by Claudius' remark to Hamlet in the first scene in which he is introduced to the audience:

How is it that the clouds still hang on you?⁴⁵

For after introducing Ahab for the first time Melville writes:

There was little or nothing, out of himself, to employ or excite Ahab, [sic] now; and thus chase away, for that one interval, the clouds that layer upon layer were piled upon his brow, as ever all clouds choose the loftiest peaks to pile themselves upon.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ibid., I. iv. 8-12.

⁴⁵ Ibid., I. ii. 65.

⁴⁶ Moby-Dick, p. 122.

But Melville's portrayal of the character of Ahab reveals a Coleridgean view of Hamlet. Starbuck provides the link when he admit that

"all of us are Ahabs."⁴⁷

Hamlet and Ahab are archetypal symbols of man's everlasting doubt and search for meaning in a world whose main feature is its horrifying dualism. Both of them feel that they are imprisoned in a universe of deceptive appearances. Hamlet's world, Denmark, is a prison to him. He tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, "To me it is a prison,"⁴⁸ and inquires,

What have you, my good friends, deserved at the hands of Fortune, that she sends you to prison hither?⁴⁹

Similarly, Ahab regards himself a prisoner, and the world as one big prison house. He tells Starbuck,

"If man will strike, strike through the mask!
How can the prisoner reach outside except by
thrusting through the wall?"⁵⁰

Hamlet and Ahab struggle to break through the walls of appearances in order to reach the reality behind. After the ghost's shocking revelation to him, Hamlet begins to doubt everything. Likewise, Ahab is only too aware of the dualism in nature. Both the ghost and the whale represent the delusion of reality. By striking at the whale's deceptive white innocence Ahab feels he is wreaking

⁴⁷ Moby-Dick, p. 507.

⁴⁸ Hamlet, II. ii. 254.

⁴⁹ Ibid., II. ii. 242-244.

⁵⁰ Moby-Dick, pp. 161-162.

his hatred upon the embodiment of all the "inscrutable malice" in the universe. As a result of their awareness of the nature of reality, Hamlet and Ahab are moody, melancholy men, suffering under the burden of "some mighty woe." Hamlet has "something in his soul, /O'er which his melancholy sits on brood."⁵¹ That Melville intended his hero to be another Hamlet figure, constantly occupied with the world of thoughts, is evident from Ishmael's exclamation to Ahab:

God help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee; and he whose intense thinking thus makes him a Prometheus; a vulture feeds upon that heart for ever; that vulture the very creature he creates.⁵²

Just as Hamlet's bitter cry,

It hath made me mad⁵³

echoes all his anguish and suffering, in the same manner, Ahab's internal wound, is the cause of his monomania for it "made him mad." But both Ahab and Hamlet are not really mad. Hamlet confesses,

I am but mad north-north-west;⁵⁴

and Ahab says,

"They think me mad . . . ; but I'm demoniac."⁵⁵

⁵¹ Hamlet, III. i. 167-168.

⁵² Moby-Dick, p. 200.

⁵³ Hamlet, III. i. 150.

⁵⁴ Ibid., II. ii. 382.

⁵⁵ Moby-Dick, p. 166.

In the same passage there is an allusion to Laertes' speech, "O heat dry up my brains," when Ahab says, "Dry heat upon my brow?"

Melville, like Shakespeare, associates madness with cunning. Ishmael admits that "human madness is oftentimes a cunning . . . thing."⁵⁶ The allusion is to Hamlet's "crafty madness,"⁵⁷ for he admits to his mother that he is "mad in craft."⁵⁸ Another quality which Melville thought Hamlet and Ahab have in common is their pride. The reason why the dark captain of the Pequod is very impressive is because he is "proud as Greek god."⁵⁹ At the same time, unlike Shakespeare, Melville's emphasis on Ahab's "fatal pride" leads us to believe that he regarded it as a tragic flaw in Ahab's character. This is not the case with Hamlet; for although, like Ahab, he is "proud, revengeful and ambitious,"⁶⁰ it is his doubt and hesitation that are emphasised as a tragic flaw in him. Furthermore, as a result of his dilemma and grief, Hamlet, is often ironic and cynical. There is none of Hamlet's "antic-disposition" in Ahab. In his mad pursuit of revenge he reflects only one of Hamlet's faces. This is why it is mainly their one obsession, their yet unachieved revenge, which provides the most obvious parallel between Hamlet and Ahab. Just as Ahab's monomania is to kill Moby-Dick, throughout the play, Hamlet's only aim is to murder Claudius. Because of this, both characters are subject to horrible nightmares. Hamlet himself

⁵⁶ Moby-Dick, p. 182.

⁵⁷ Hamlet, III. i. 8.

⁵⁸ Ibid., III. iv. 188.

⁵⁹ Moby-Dick, p. 468.

⁶⁰ Hamlet, III. iv. 188.

admits,

I have had dreams,⁶¹

and Ishmael tells us that Ahab is often

forced from his hammock by exhausting and intolerably vivid dreams.⁶²

This is because "Ahab has that that's bloody on his mind," which links him closely with Hamlet,

My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth.⁶³

Though intent on their revenge, both Hamlet and Ahab are aware of the forces of fate operating on their life and destiny. Hamlet tells his mother,

... heaven hath pleased it so,
To punish me with this, and this with me,⁶⁴
That I must be their scourge and minister.

Ahab too knows that he is fated,

"I am the Fates' lieutenant; I act under orders."⁶⁵

"God does that beating, does that thinking, does that living, and not I. . . . we are turned round and round in this world, like yonder windlass, and Fate is the handspike."⁶⁶

Nevertheless, while in both Hamlet and Moby-Dick, we are made

⁶¹ Hamlet, II. ii. 259.

⁶² Moby-Dick, p. 199.

⁶³ See Mathiessen, p. 425.

⁶⁴ Hamlet, III. iv. 173-175.

⁶⁵ Moby-Dick, p. 554.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 536.

aware that the "whole act's immutably decreed," there is one instance in each book where we feel the possibility of a change in events. In the "Closet Scene," Hamlet implores his father's ghost,

Do not look upon me,
Lest with this piteous action you convert
My stern effects, then what I have to do
Will want true colour, tears perchance for blood.⁶⁷

Ahab too cannot bear the sight of suffering. His relationship to Pip, the ship's fool, is most significant, for it reveals Ahab's humanity. Crazy and defiant though he often is, Ahab is full of compassion for man's plight in this universe:

"There is that in thee, poor lad, which I feel
too curing to my malady. Like cures like; and for
this hunt, my malady becomes my most desired health."⁶⁸

In Moby-Dick the reader often realises that "the voices of many Shakespearean characters help to intensify Ahab's."⁶⁹ This is also true of Starbuck's soliloquies which vibrate with echoes from Hamlet. But a curious analogy is the one existing between the whale and the ghost of Hamlet's father. For, in many of the descriptive passages about the whale in Moby-Dick, we find numerous allusions to the ghost. Like the dead king,

While in life the great whale's body may have been a real
terror to his foes, in his death his ghost becomes a power-
less panic to a world.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Hamlet, III. iv. 127-130.

⁶⁸ Moby-Dick, p. 525.

⁶⁹ Matthiessen, p. 425.

⁷⁰ Moby-Dick, p. 308.

Ishmael laments that

young whales, in the highest health, and swelling with noble aspirations, [are] prematurely cut off in the warm flush and May of life.⁷¹

The allusion is to Hamlet's speech:

A' took my father grossly, full of bread,
With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May.⁷²

Both passages describe a premature death. Melville takes over the same image as well as the words "flush" and "May" from Shakespeare in order to enrich his own expression.

Another parallel situation is presented in Ahab's soliloquy to the whale's head:

"Speak, thou vast and venerable head . . . Speak, mighty head, and tell us the secret thing that is in thee."⁷³

This speech alludes to Horatio's charge to the ghost:

Speak, speak, speak, I charge thee speak.⁷⁴

But the "black hooded head" of the whale reveals no secrets. Similarly the ghost of Hamlet's father who is "forbid to tell the secrets of his prison house," tells no tales. We also recall Hamlet's exclamation to the ghost:

Alas, poor ghost,⁷⁵

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 358.

⁷² Hamlet, III. iii. 80-81.

⁷³ Moby-Dick, p. 309.

⁷⁴ Hamlet, I. i. 51.

⁷⁵ Ibid., I v. 4.

When Ishmael describes the pursuit of a huge, old whale by his hunters as "a terrific, most pitiable sight." A more significant allusion is found in the passage where Ishmael describes the whale's "most piteous" "last expiring spout." He sadly comments that the whale

must die the death and be murdered, in order to light the gay bridals and other merry-makings of men, and also to illuminate the solemn churches that preach unconditional inoffensiveness by all to all.⁷⁶

This recalls the revelry theme in Hamlet. For just as Hamlet's melancholy is emphasised by contrast to the revelry, likewise in this speech, Ishmael emphasises the dualism in nature, where woe goes hand in hand with merry-making. The gay bridals are a reference to Claudius' marriage. There was "mirth in the funeral" of Hamlet's father for the murderer was already reaping the rewards of his bloody deed.

A further link between the whale and the ghost is found in Chapter LIX, "Squid," where Starbuck, alarmed by the sight of the Squid, calls it "thou white ghost." On its first appearance, the crew mistake it for the White Whale, Moby-Dick. So, again, we have the association of the whale with the ghost, both of which are "unearthly . . . chance-like apparitions of life." Starbuck tells us that,

⁷⁶ Moby-Dick, p. 356.

"few whale-ships ever beheld [the great live Squid], and returned to their ports to tell of it."⁷⁷

This is another reference to the "undiscovered country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns." The "spirit-spout" which is constantly reappearing to the crew, alluring them on and on in their quest and search for Moby-Dick, provides another parallel to the ghost.

At the end of the chapter the Squid is referred to as the "Anak" of the tribe of cuttle-fish. It is very probable that Melville intended a pun here, since the word "anaks" (ἄναξ) means King in Greek. If the allusion is conscious here, this would strongly support the previously mentioned allusions to the King's ghost in Hamlet. That Melville had this play in mind while writing this chapter is evident in a humorous allusion to Hamlet's first soliloquy,

O, that this too too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,⁷⁸

where Melville takes over the word "resolve," as well as the sentence pattern, directly from Shakespeare:

There seems some ground to imagine that the great Kraken of Bishop Pontoppodan may ultimately resolve itself into Squid.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Moby-Dick, p. 276.

⁷⁸ Hamlet, I. ii. 129-130. Since the word "sullied" is a later emendation by George Macdonald, Melville must have read "solid."

⁷⁹ Moby-Dick, p. 277.

Judging from the numerous allusions to Hamlet, Melville's achievement in Moby-Dick owes a great deal to his study of Shakespeare's plays in general, and to this play in particular.

The dramatist's effect in this case acted as a catalyst, for it helped Melville realize his full potentialities as a writer. It is ironic to note that in his next book, Pierre, this same influence worked entirely to his disadvantage and turned out to be one of the major reasons for the book's failure.

CHAPTER III

THE FOOL OF TRUTH

"The Coming Storm"

A picture By S.R. Gifford, and Owned by
E.B. Included in the N. A Exhibition, April, 1865.

All feeling hearts must feel for him
Who felt this picture. Presage dim --
Dim inklings from the shadowy sphere
Fixed him and fascinated here.

A demon-cloud like the mountain one
Burst on a spirit as mild
As this urned lake, the home of shades,
But Shakespeare's pensive child.

Never the lines had lightly scanned,
Steeped in fable, steeped in fate,
The Hamlet in his heart was 'ware,
Such hearts can antedate.

No utter surprise can come to him
Who reaches Shakespeare's core,
That which we seek and shun is there --
Man's final lore.¹

Melville's obsession with the "dim inklings from the shadowy sphere," symbols of the evil in the universe, is characteristic of his literary achievement during the years, 1849-1852, namely, Moby-Dick and Pierre. These two works, which mark the climax of Shakespeare's influence on Melville, illustrate best this obsession with "darkness," which was an important factor in the shaping of his

¹ Herman Melville, "The Coming Storm" in Herman Melville, ed. R.W.B. Lewis (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1962), p. 370.

tragic vision. The literary product of this period in Melville's life was deeply affected by the Shakespearean and Hawthornesque portrayal of this very element - "the power of blackness." Both writers dropped "germinous seeds" in his soul. The dark, defiant captain of the ill-fated Pequod is as memorable as any of Shakespeare's dark, tragic heroes. Moby-Dick's special power over the modern reader is mainly due to the force of Melville's effective presentation of the "darkness" manifested in the universe. Ahab is a man who embraces darkness; he is "darkness leaping out of light." Like many Shakespearean heroes he is a man isolated from human society. However, Ahab in his egoistic defiance is a descendent of a long line of rebels. He is the counterpart of the Memnons and the Hamlets of this world -- sensitive souls struggling to assert their individuality in the face of gigantic and indifferent cosmic forces.

In Pierre, published in 1852, only one year after Moby-Dick, Melville tried to produce another variation on the Hamlet theme:

that all meditation is worthless, unless it prompt to action; that it is not for man to stand shilly shallying amid the conflicting invasions of surrounding impulses; that in the earliest instant of conviction, the roused man must strike, and, if possible, with the precision and the force of the lightning-bolt.²

Pierre himself draws this moral from the "pregnant tragedy" of Hamlet. Yet, there is a vast difference between Melville's achievement in

² Herman Melville, Pierre (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1957), p. 236.

Pierre and his achievement in his previous work, Moby-Dick. There is no doubt that Melville in his presentation of Pierre was actually presenting an American Hamlet. This is obvious from an examination of the text itself. Melville, who believed that the Egyptian fable of Memnon "embodied the Hamletism of the antique world," and that "the English tragedy is but Egyptian Memnon Montaignised and modernised,"³ tried to produce in Pierre a modern case of "that nobly-striving but ever-shipwrecked character in some royal youths . . . , of which that statue is the melancholy type." This is supported by a point which Dorothee Metlitsky Finkelstein raises in her book Melville's Orienda, for she sees a significant connection between the hero's name, Pierre, which in French means stone, and the Egyptian myth:

The full implications of the Memnon image come to the surface when we consider that the hero himself is "stone" - pierre. The Memnon stone is therefore a symbolic projection of the hero's own personality - a crystallization of his endless probings into the mysteries of his own soul⁴

Judging from the numerous allusions to Shakespeare's plays, especially to Hamlet, Pierre in both characterization and language is even more heavily indebted to Shakespeare than Moby-Dick. Pierre's affinities to various Shakespearean characters is fully obvious through-

³ Pierre, p. 191.

⁴ Dorothee Metlitsky Finkelstein, Melville's Orienda (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 139.

out the work. At the beginning of the book these affinities take second place to those connecting him with Romeo. His mother tells him, "but you are a Romeo, you know." Pierre's reply,

"Romeo! oh, no. I am far from being Romeo, . . . I laugh, but he cried; poor Romeo! . . . he came to a very deplorable end, did Romeo,"⁵

sounds the first note of foreboding for the disaster to come. As the story proceeds and Pierre enters the labyrinth of ambiguities, he begins to emerge as a Hamlet figure -- "The flower of virtue cropped by a too rare mischance."⁶ Pierre's speeches abound with such allusions to Shakespeare. The very element that made Ahab's poetic soliloquies all the more forceful is that Ahab's dramatic speeches are in perfect harmony with his character as an archetypal tragic hero set against the background of cosmic forces. But Pierre's rhetoric is ill-fitting to his role as a young man in an ordinary rural and urban setting. Compared to the world-wide drama of Ahab, Pierre's desperate tale of domestic tragedy in the Massachusetts Berkshires is too limited in scope.

Pierre's tragedy is too defined in time, and restricted in scope, for Melville's grandiloquent presentation.⁷

The Elizabethan diction Melville often uses in the book cannot but sound imitative and artificial in a nineteenth-century setting. His

⁵ Pierre, p. 23.

⁶ Ibid., p. 191.

⁷ Rosen, p. 118.

description of Lucy Tartan is only one of many such passages:

Her cheeks were tinted with the most delicate white and red, the white predominating. Her eyes some god brought down from heaven; her hair was Danae's, sprangled with Jove's shower; her teeth were dived for in the Persian Sea.⁸

The failure of the language in Pierre is the result of Melville's effort to imitate the dramatic diction of Shakespeare. However, he only succeeds in producing a kind of strained archaic diction very different from the fluent and poetic prose of Moby-Dick. Furthermore, Melville by declaring, "I write as I please," often gets carried away by his own bombastic rhetoric. In many passages his hysterical language is the result of his losing control over his medium. An extreme case is his description of Pierre:

The cheeks of his soul collapsed in him; he dashed himself in blind fury and swift madness against the wall, and fell dabbling in the vomit of his loathed identity.⁹

If such a passage is the result of Melville's effort to portray his own version of the mad confused Hamlet's search for identity, it is the best testimony of his failure.

The similarities between Melville's romance and Shakespeare's tragedy included not only references to certain scenes and lines but also the duplication of many of the characters in Hamlet.¹⁰ This

⁸ Pierre, p. 30.

⁹ Ibid., p. 239.

¹⁰ See Rosen, Chap. IV; and Matthiessen, pp. 467-487.

is most obvious in the mother-son relationship between Mrs. Glendinning and her only son, Pierre, a relationship strikingly parallel to that of Gertrude and her only son Hamlet. There are several allusions to the "Closet Scene" in Hamlet. The speeches of Pierre and his mother often echo those of the Shakespearean mother and son. Pierre's mother mocks him for being impatient with her; "well, well, well," Pierre replies,

"It is not well, well, well; but ill, ill, ill, to torture me so, mother; go on, do,"¹¹

We are reminded of the Queen's reproachful remark to Hamlet:

Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue,

and Hamlet's answer:

Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue.¹²

In both cases, the son is impatient for the mother to reveal directly what she wants to say by coming straight to the point. Pierre's comparison of his father's two portraits also brings to mind Hamlet's comparison of the portraits of his father and step-father.¹³ Another parallel character is found in Lucy Tartan. In her pure innocence she becomes the Ophelia to Pierre's Hamlet. This is made all the more obvious when Pierre goes to her cottage "as disordered in his

¹¹ Pierre, p. 77.

¹² Hamlet, III. iv. 11-12.

¹³ Ibid., III. iv. 53.

person, as haggard in his face."¹⁴ The allusion here is to Ophelia's description of Hamlet when he enters her closet.¹⁵ Further parallels are supplied by Frederic Tartan, Lucy's brother, who like Laertes, is shocked because "the sweet girl is mad."¹⁶ At the end, Frederic, holding his dead sister in his arms, is Melville's version of Laertes jumping into Ophelia's tomb to embrace her for the last time. In the same scene which, true to the tragic end in Hamlet, is rather overdone because of the number of corpses lying around, the Horatio figure lamenting his departed friend is Millthorpe. But Millthorpe's lament:

"Ah, Pierre! my old companion, Pierre; -- school-mate --
play-mate -- friend!"¹⁷

is too artificial and affected. It lacks the Shakespearean eloquence in the emotive language of Horatio's speech,

Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!¹⁸

Apart from the parallels between the main characters in Pierre and those in Hamlet, Melville sometimes draws upon some minor characters. Falsgrave's attitude toward young Pierre reminds us of

¹⁴ Pierre, p. 255.

¹⁵ Hamlet, II. i. 78-81.

¹⁶ Pierre, p. 452.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 505.

¹⁸ Hamlet, V. ii. 357-358.

Polonius and his pompous wisdom. Old Casks, the short old landlord, is the same type as the clown gravedigger in Hamlet.¹⁹

Pierre, the hero of Melville's book, is the character most indebted to the Shakespearean original. He is Melville's 19th century American version of Hamlet. Pierre, himself an admiring reader of Hamlet, sees the analogy between his situation and that of the Shakespearean hero:

The time is out of joint; -- Oh cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!²⁰

Pierre's idealization of his father in the early stages of the story echoes Hamlet's feelings for his own departed father. Although the ambiguities which confront Pierre make him doubt the heroic noble image he has of his father, yet part of his dilemma is caused by his resolution to guard his father's memory from any blemishes. Both Hamlet and Pierre, however, after their shattering discoveries of the evil in the universe, the "darkness" in both nature and man, begin to doubt and question everything. Hamlet's concern with the problem of honesty, between what seems and what is, is reflected in a similar change in Pierre:

Not only was the long-cherished image of his father now transfigured before him from a green foliaged tree into a blasted trunk, but every other image in his mind attested the universality of that electral light which had darted into his

¹⁹ Matthiessen, p. 477, and Rosen p. 114.

²⁰ Pierre, p. 235.

soul. Not even his lovely, immaculate mother, remained entirely untouched, unaltered by the shock.²¹

The "wide sea of trouble into which he plunged" presents Pierre with his dilemma. Unlike Shakespeare, Melville fails in his effort to portray a Hamlet-like dilemma. The frequent ambiguities in Pierre result in a tone of exaggerated mystery, confusion, and gloom. Just as the Ghost in Hamlet plants the seeds of doubt in the prince's heart, so with Isabel who ushers in a host of horrifying ambiguities. Her dark, unearthly beauty, and the atmosphere of mystery and mysticism which surround her, are emphasised. She has a special power over Pierre -- coming from the fact, gradually revealed, that they had a common father. She seems to evoke the ghost of Pierre's father. Pierre is haunted by her mournful face which reflects the same ambiguous expression as that in his father's portrait:

Painted before the daughter was conceived or born, like a dumb seer, the portrait still seemed levelling its prophetic finger at that empty air, from which Isabel did finally emerge.²²

Just as the Ghost causes Hamlet to question the very nature of Reality and leads him on in his search for Truth, and just as the "silvery jet" in Moby-Dick keeps appearing to Ahab and alluring him on in his vindictive quest, so with Isabel and Pierre. Very often we are made to feel that Isabel is the living symbol of "blackness" in the universe.

²¹ Ibid., p. 123.

²² Pierre, p. 474.

Her jet black hair, dark olive skin, black apparel and dark beauty are elaborately emphasised. Suddenly appearing from some dimly remembered, mysterious realm, she stimulates the doubt in Pierre and provokes him to strike through the mask of appearances. Pierre's first glimpses of the evil in the world lead to a perhaps justified shock and disillusion. Yet, unlike Hamlet, his hesitation does not last for long; on the contrary, his miserable end is brought about by the "remarkable instantaneousness in his actions."²³ What Melville wants to prove in Pierre is that it is "easy for man to think like a hero, but hard for man to act like one."²⁴

Pierre's confusion and doubt are so intense that they must be a reflection of his author's state of puzzlement while writing it. Critics, shocked by the psychological chaos revealed in Pierre attributed the book's failure to Melville's madness during this period.²⁵ The main reason for the book's "artistic failure" is that it actually reveals too much of its author's personal bitterness. By the time Melville came to write Pierre, his seventh book in six years, he was so discouraged by his own personal experiences and disappointments that he could not restrain the harsh note of bitter disillusionment which predominates in it. Melville's pessimism conveyed in such remarks as Pierre's exclamation, "I hate the world,"

²³ Ibid., p. 254.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 238.

²⁵ Rosen, p. 106.

is the inevitable outcome of Melville's horrifying discovery:

To its axis, the world being nothing but superinduced
superficies. By vast pains we mine into the pyramid;
by horrible gropings we come to the central room;
with joy we espy the sacrophagus; but we lift the lid
-- and no body is there! -- appallingly vacant as vast
is the soul of man!²⁶

Because of this pessimistic view of human nature and the universe,
which Melville reveals in Pierre, images of anguish and darkness
occur too frequently. We feel that Pierre's dilemma is Melville's
own. Melville probably saw in himself another example of "that nobly-
striving but ever-shipwrecked character" which Hamlet represents.
This is why he got personally involved in his presentation of Pierre.
Pierre's confused search and gropings for truth, his suffering and
anguish are often reflections of Melville's personal experiences
in real life. By the time he came to write Pierre he had become too
aware of the woe and misery in the world brought about by the cruelty
of both nature and man. After two years of agonized writing Moby-Dick
was condemned by the public as another one of Melville's fiascoes.
As evidence of the book's unpopularity one needs only to state the
fact that during the remaining thirty-nine years of Melville's life
it was considered a specially good year when Moby-Dick sold as many
as 50 copies!

The universal condemnation of this book affected Melville in
two ways. From a financial point of view, it made things worse.

²⁶ Pierre, p. 397.

Already nearly \$700 in debt while writing Moby-Dick, Melville had great expectations for the book's success and counted on the rewards it would bring him. But what hurt him more was that the book's failure represented his failure as an American writer.

For this reason, Melville took up Pierre as a medium through which he could convey all the bitterness of his defeat.

He shall learn, and very bitterly learn, that though the world worship Mediocrity and Common place, yet hath it fire and sword for all contemporary grandeur; that though it swears that it fiercely assails all Hypocrisy, yet hath it not always an ear for earnestness.²⁷

There are many autobiographical references in Pierre. Pierre's indignant protest to a joint editor of the "Captain Kid Monthly,"

"To the devil with you and your Daguerrotype!"²⁸

is a direct reference to an incident in Melville's private life.

In one of his letters to Duyckinck (February 12, 1851) Melville refuses to send him his daguerrotype which the former had asked

for.²⁹ Even his reasons for declining Duyckinck's offer are simi-

lar to those written in Pierre. Melville's identification with

Pierre, however, reaches its climax in Book XVII, "Young America in

Literature," and Book XVIII, "Pierre, As a Juvenile Author, Reconsidered."

In these chapters, Pierre, the young American writer "wearing on his

²⁷ Ibid., p. 368.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 355.

²⁹ Letters, pp. 120-21.

hands those treacherous plague-spots of indigence -- videlicet, blots from the inkstand," becomes one with his author:

Who shall tell all the thoughts and feelings of Pierre in that desolate and shivering room, when at last the idea obtruded, that the wiser and the profounder he should grow, the more and more he lessened the chances for bread; that could he now hurl his deep book out of the window, and fall to some shallow nothing of a novel, composable in a month at the longest, then could he reasonably hope for both appreciation and cash. But the devouring profundities, now opened up in him, consume all his vigour; would he, he could not now be entertainingly and profitably shallow in some pellucid and merry romance.³⁰

In autobiographical terms, this is obviously a reference to the failure of Moby-Dick. Had Melville continued with his original plan of writing a "romance of adventure," the book would have probably proved to be a success. It would have also put money in his "empty purse." The allusion to Moby-Dick is more emphasised by the frequent reference to Pierre's book as the "Inferno." Surely it is none other than Melville's book which is "broiled in hell fire." For, only a few months before its publication Melville wrote a letter to Hawthorne expressing the same difficulties and confusion that Pierre suffered from:

I am so pulled hither and thither by circumstances Dollars damn me; and the malicious Devil is forever grinning upon me, holding the door ajar What I feel most moved to write, that is banned, -- it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the other way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches.³¹

³⁰ Pierre, p. 425.

³¹ Letters, p. 128.

As a result of such an attitude, the literary work of both Pierre and his author are the embodiment of their defiance of public taste. Both of them saw the "inevitable rocks" in their way but they were resolved to make a "courageous wreck." They represent man's longing to free himself from the set standards and conventions of their time. Melville's cry in his letter to Hawthorne,

I stand for the heart. To the dogs with the head!³²

resounds in Pierre's exclamation,

The heart! the heart! 'tis God's anointed; let me pursue the heart!³³

Pierre's search for Truth and identity results in his physical exhaustion and spiritual anguish. Like Melville, unable to endure the strain, his health gives way and he suffers from weak eyesight. But, more than anything else, it is his dilemma, because of endless ambiguities, that brings about his final desperate act of suicide. His vision of the defiant "heaven-assaulting" Enceladus reveals to him his deepest and most secret doubts and ambitions, yet shocks him with the horrifying realization that he is an armless and helpless giant, forever imprisoned in earth. Identifying himself with Enceladus, Pierre's "immitigable hate" becomes a frantic despair. The intensity of the despair revealed in Pierre is all the more horrifying because it portrays Melville's own actual grief and disillusionment. Pierre's bitter cry,

³² Ibid., p. 129.

³³ Pierre, p. 127.

"Oh, I am sick, sick, sick!"³⁴

is wrung out of Melville's agonized soul. His description of Pierre as "the fool of Truth, the food of Virtue, the fool of Fate,"³⁵ is a harsh satirical comment on his own life.

Melville's failure in Pierre, is all the more significant because it follows only one year after his achievement in Moby-Dick. Pierre lacks the profound tragic vision revealed in the masterpiece. In Moby-Dick there is an acute awareness of the "darkness" in the universe and confusing contraries manifested in nature. Nevertheless, the book ends with a pessimistic but at the same time a serene acceptance of the world as it is, and as it will always be. Ishmael, the only sailor who escapes the wreck, survives as an orphan in a fatherless universe, and "the great shroud of the sea" rolls on "as it rolled five thousand years ago,"³⁶ Pierre, on the other hand, although revealing a similar awareness of the "inscrutable malice" in the world, lacks any kind of tragic or moral vision. It is the confused literary failure of a confused author. All that it succeeds in conveying to the reader is a situation of bitter puzzlement and gloom. The reason why Pierre is a petty character compared to the unforgettable Ahab can be inferred from Hazlitt's remark that "it is we who are Hamlet." Coleridge also implied the same thing when he admitted, "I have a

³⁴ Ibid., p. 380.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 499.

³⁶ Moby-Dick, p. 535.

smack of Hamlet myself." We are so moved by Ahab's drama because all of us feel and sympathise with him. As in Hamlet's case, Ahab, in his madness and defiance, expresses all our doubts and misgivings. This feeling of empathy which we experience with Ahab and Hamlet is missing in our attitude to Pierre. The book fails because the reader does not feel himself personally involved in Pierre's sad tale. Melville's efforts to produce another tragedy of man's universal struggle in an impersonal universe fails because, by identifying himself with his Pierre, Melville's hero cannot be accepted as the archetypal symbol that Ahab is. It is ironic that just as T.S. Eliot condemned Hamlet as an artistic failure, Melville's tragedy of an American Hamlet is a similar case where the author's emotions proved to be excessive for the medium in which they were expressed.

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