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**The American Novel:
Two Studies**

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An Analysis of *Typee*, *Mardi*, *Moby Dick*,
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Herman Melville as an Existentialist: An Analysis of *Typee*, *Mardi*, *Moby Dick*, and *The Confidence Man*

by Saada Ishag*

A quest for certainty in an absurd world where there is no certainty, no definite meaning, and the impossibility of ever attaining certainty, is the dominant theme of Melville's philosophical novels, *Typee*, *Mardi*, *Moby Dick*, and *The Confidence Man*. The theme of quest takes a circular form—a voyage, a world, and a wanderer. His protagonists traverse the whole world in search of their ever-fleeing goal, only to return to the same point from which they started, expressing the metaphysical paradox that nothing changes because nothing remains, nothing comes and nothing goes because all is a matter of a coming and a going. Man will forever be a wanderer, “. . . sail on forbidden seas, land on barbarous coasts,”¹ “. . . in search for the ungraspable phantom of life.”² At the metaphorical level, since the physical annihilation does not solve the metaphysical problem of Melville's protagonists, the quest must go on beyond finite realms.

So rich are Melville's novels in conceptual content that they are open to metaphysical, religious, and psychological interpretations; precisely because the uncertainties and irreducible ambiguities are the very essence of his novels, they fascinate the twentieth century reader who sees his own riddled world reflected in them.

Implicit in Taji's search for the mysterious Yillah, Ahab's pursuit of the phantom whale, Ishmael's endless wanderings, Pierre's musings on the ambiguity of all human relationships, is the search for the “thing-in-itself.” Little do they heed Nietzsche's admonition that “. . . one should have more respect for the bashfulness with which nature has hidden herself behind riddles and iridescent uncertainties.”³ His protagonists storm the heavens, span the oceans, are bewildered, confused, and anguished when confronted with the human condition, and despair at being unable to find a meaning in existence. Horrified by the “nothingness” that surrounds them and, as if haunted by Furies, they plunge deeper into the search of that “. . . mortally intolerable truth,”

. . . all deep earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous slavish shore.⁴

The futility of their efforts flings them back into the abysmal depths of

* Miss Ishag is an Assistant Professor of English, Sino Muslim College, Karachi, Pakistan. Portions of this study originated as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Specialist in Education, at Kansas State Teachers College, Emporia.

¹Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, p. 26.

²*Ibid.*, p. 24.

³Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, p. 683.

⁴Melville, *op cit.*, p. 99.

loneliness and despair. Melville's protagonists, without the company of ancient gods or fellow men, ". . . live in a sea of infinite reflection, where no man can call to another, where all buoys are dialectical."⁵ They, for whom life is a matter of all or nothing, push toward the very grounds or basis of reality, and eventually end up in "shipwreck" where all reason and existence must go down.

The total "shipwreck" symbolically depicts the death of an old order or epoch, in which certainties were possible; out of its ruins the modern man must evolve a new consciousness, a new mode of existence that accepts absurdity of the world and contingency of human existence as facts, and yet learns to live by the rule of his own honesty, integrity, and humanity⁶ —a negative thought affirming the possibility of a positive action. Sartre's highly gloomy and pessimistic novels and plays bear the same message.

To the modern reader, Melville's novels read like dramatic statements of the philosophies of Heidegger and Sartre, the best representatives of existentialism in philosophy, who have given a unified expression to the thoughts of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. From the criteria established by Jean Wahl, a leading existentialist (with the approval of other existentialists), to distinguish between existentialist and non-existentialist philosophers, the reader can easily determine Melville's philosophic position as well as discern the Heideggerian and Sartrean accents in his novels.

If we say: "Man is in this world, a world limited by death and experienced in anguish; is aware of himself as essentially anxious; is burdened by his solitude within the horizon of his temporality;" then we recognize the accents of Heideggerian philosophy. If we say: "Man, by opposition to the 'In-itself,' is the 'For-itself,' is never at rest, and strives in vain towards a union of the 'In-itself' and the 'For-itself'"; then we are speaking in the manner of Sartrean existentialism. If we say: "I am a thinking thing," as Descartes said; or, "The real things are Ideas," as Plato said; or, "The Ego accompanies all our representations," as Kant said; then we are moving in a sphere which is no longer that of the philosophy of existence.⁷

From the above quotation, Melville's philosophic position becomes very clear. He was by no means an idealist like Plato, Descartes, or Kant, but, like the existentialists, reveals a deep concern for the isolated and lonely man. His philosophical novels reflect or rather foreshadow Heidegger's world of radical human finitude from which God is painfully absent, and Sartre's concern for the anguished man searching for securities and certainties.

So striking are the similarities between the themes of Melville's novels and existentialism, that this study was undertaken to define these themes and trace their presence in Melville's novels, *Typee*, *Mardi*, *Moby Dick*, and *The Confidence Man*.

⁵Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz*, trans. William Earle, p. 32.

⁶Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism and Humanism," *French Philosophers From Descartes to Sartre*, Leonard M. Marsak, ed., p. 485.

⁷Jean Wahl, *A Short History of Existentialism*, trans. F. Williams and S. Maron, cited by Edith Kern (ed.) *Sartre: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 4.

I

***Typee* and *Mardi*: Melville's Early Existentialist Experiments**

The immediate success of *Typee*, a South Sea romance, in America and England launched Melville on his career as a novelist. Had it failed, the world would have been deprived of the universally acclaimed classic *Moby Dick*. It appears that Melville's seven years' (1839-1845) apprenticeship as a seaman coincides with the development of his latent intellectual and meditative powers, as he himself says in *Moby Dick*, ". . . meditation and waters are wedded forever." The sea helped Melville "discover" himself and continued to fascinate him all his life. The sea furnished him with a powerful symbol of the regenerating and destructive forces of life, inextricably connected with human existence. The sea also provided him with the most basic and ancient plot-journey by sea, suggesting the contingency of human existence and the eternity of sea, ". . . the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago."⁸ When Melville, in his oft-quoted letter to Hawthorne, wrote, ". . . from my twenty-fifth year I date my life,"⁹ the year of *Typee*'s composition, he was actually underestimating himself.

However, the external events leading to the production of *Typee* can be summarized easily. Melville, having unsuccessfully tried his hand at many odd jobs—a farm hand, a school teacher, a sales clerk—at the age of twenty-one (1839), was shipped as a common sailor on the *St. Lawrence*, a packet plying between New York and Liverpool. His four months' experience on the *St. Lawrence* acquainted him with poverty, squalor, and with the brutal and evil existence of sailors, which later served as the raw material for his two novels *Redburn* and *White Jacket*. Apparently, he seems to have been so disgusted with this experience that on his return he made no attempt to find a job on the ships but took up school teaching.

But later, perhaps driven by the necessity to earn more in order to support the family, or to escape from the humdrum existence of a school teacher's life, or for the sake of adventure, he threw up his job and signed the articles on the *Acushnet*. On January 3, 1841, Melville once again sailed, on the *Acushnet* on her maiden voyage to the South Seas fisheries. For eleven months the *Acushnet* sailed far and wide in its hunt for sperm whales through the South Pacific, the hunting grounds of whales. By this time, Melville had his fill of adventure and was thoroughly sick of sea life. When the *Acushnet* lowered her anchor in

⁸Herman Melville, *op. cit.*, p. 431.

⁹Eleanor Melville Metcalf, *Herman Melville: Cycle and Epicycle*, p. 110.

Nuku Hiva, Marquesas Islands, for fresh supplies, Melville and his fellow crewman, Richard Tobias Greene, who figures as "Toby" in *Typee*, deserted the ship. The events following the desertion are dramatically described in *Typee*. After a long and precarious journey through the wild and hilly terrains of the islands, where Melville (or "Tommo," as he was called by the natives) contracted his mysterious leg infection, by sheer miscalculation they found themselves in the Taipi valley among a tribe of reputed cannibals, instead of the Happar tribe, who were known to be friendly to the white sailors. Belying their savage reputation, the Taipis (Typees) welcomed them as their guests and treated them with extreme hospitality. For a time, they enjoyed the comfortable and care-free life and observed the interesting manners and customs of the Typees. After two weeks, Toby was given permission to leave the valley, in search of a doctor or for medicine for Tommo's ailing leg. Soon after Toby's departure, Melville or Tommo became intensely conscious of his captivity and suspicious of the ultimate designs of his savage hosts. He was finally rescued from the Typees by the help of men from the *Lucy Ann*, an Australian whaling ship. After a series of short voyages and a brief stay at Tahiti (for the treatment of his leg injury) and Honolulu, he enlisted as an ordinary seaman aboard the frigate *United States*, an American warship. He was finally discharged from the U. S. Navy on October 14, 1844, and joined his mother at Lansingburgh. He was now in his twenty-fifth year with no definite plans for the future; but, at the encouragement from his friends and relatives to record the interesting events of his captivity, he worked on *Typee* during the winter. *Typee's* immediate success called for its sequel. In *Omoo* he picked up the thread of the story where *Typee* had ended; the book covers his experiences in Tahiti, where he had to stay for medical treatment for his leg infection, and, also, his brief stay at Honolulu before he returned home.

The publication of *Typee* (1846) and its sequel *Omoo* (1847) established Melville's reputation as a writer of adventure novels, something which he positively detested. With two successful novels to his credit, Melville, in his true vein, in *Mardi* launched on a metaphysical adventure, much to the surprise of his readers. By this time Melville was a married man with one child. The financial failure of his ambitious novel, *Mardi*, forced him to write *Redburn* and *White Jacket*, to which he referred as "bread and butter" novels in the style of *Typee*, the type of novels his readers expected from him. In *Redburn* and *White Jacket* he revealed his zeal as a social reformer. In all these novels are the facets that reveal the multidimensional thought and style of Melville, which found their supreme expression in *Moby Dick*. But the basic theme and form of all his novels are established in *Typee*: a search for truth in the form of a hazardous journey.

Typee is considered by almost all critics as a literal and factual record of Melville's captivity in the Typee valley. But to read *Typee* at this literal level is like reading *Moby Dick* as a treatise on whales and whaling

industry with a complete disregard for Melville's creative and imaginative powers. *Typee* is the product of those youthful meditations of Melville who, like Ishmael in the fore-castle, dived into the deep seas to grasp the meaning of existence during his apparently idle and aimless wanderings on the charterless seas. *Typee* may not be as rich in metaphysical overtones as *Moby Dick*, but, all the same, it is not a completely factual record of events. For Melville truth is always more than factual or literal truth, a sort of a metaphysical truth or vital truth; whereas unvarnished truth means strict adherence to facts. But *Typee* is not as "unvarnished" as Melville pretended; to forestall adverse criticism, he had actually varnished the truth in *Typee*.¹⁰ Behind the mask of a literal biographer is the conscious artist who used his own creative imagination and the imagination of others to make the novel appear more realistic. He deliberately obscured certain episodes, distorted the actual period of captivity, and with the use of dramatic techniques created suspense. To be sure, he used the techniques of realism to apprehend reality, within the context of an actual situation, a method or technique common to all his novels. So deep was his passion to discover and portray truth, that ". . . he set himself against the main currents of fiction writing of his time,"¹¹ for, indeed the themes he explored in *Typee* do not fall within the scope of an adventurous novel. He was fully aware that the vital truth he was aiming at conveying about the self-styled martyrdom of missionaries would shock and antagonize the entire Christendom. He, nevertheless, did not hesitate to show how the "self-exiled heralds of the Cross" were turning the natives into "draught horses" and had "evangelized [them] into beasts of burden."¹² This shot did not miss the mark. Being highly critical of the organized inhumanity of the western civilization, he did not hesitate from exposing the purposeless, oppressive physical suffering, and inhuman indifference of a deadly mechanical civilization (from which Tommo and Toby were fleeing) by contrasting it with the simple, innocent, and carefree existence of the Polynesians. But the irony of the situation is that (the principle of harmony sought by Tommo or Melville is found wanting everywhere) it is neither in the organized life nor in easy existence in the midst of unsurpassing beauty of the islands. Like an impartial commentator, Melville points out the shortcomings of the mechanized life as well as of the primitive existence. "The Polynesian savage surrounded by the luxurious provisions of nature . . ." may be enjoying ". . . an infinitely happier . . ." life ". . . than the self complacent European . . .," but the very fact that he leads a ". . . less intellectual existence . . ."¹³ cancels the idea of perfect happiness. A life dominated by superstitions, "taboos," threatened by inroads of foreign aggression whether by missionaries or French generals, is far from being ideal. Like a true existentialist, Melville reveals

¹⁰Allen Hayman, "The Real and the Original: Herman Melville's Theory of Prose Fiction," *Modern Fiction Studies* XIII, 3 (Autumn, 1962), p. 217.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 219.

¹²Herman Melville, *Typee*, p. 212.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 133.

the eternally unhappy condition of man, a theme which he explores more deeply in *Mardi*.

But his contemporary readers missed the entire point of the novel when they enjoyed *Typee* as a sort of utopia, a romantic novel of hair-breadth escapes in an idyllic setting. But Melville was not reflecting back a comfortable image of life; on the contrary, he wanted to reveal, by contrast, the terrors of civilized barbarity as well as the failings of the intellectually inert world of the primitives.

Typee is neither a purely ". . . adventurous yarn," nor a ". . . landmark in the literature of primitive utopias,"¹⁴ but a strong indictment on Civilization, with the missionary movement, and foreign aggressions on the rights of humanity, as its sinister embellishments.

These, precisely, are the existential trends in Melville's novels; the focus of existentialism, on which the contemporary existentialists like Sartre, Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Salinger, Mailer, and host of other writers take their stand. Like Kierkegaard, Melville, and Nietzsche, they, too, insist on unmasking the social, religious, and moral hypocrisies of the soul-annihilating, mechanical culture. They all hold that only by demolishing the false values of a decadent culture, can the new values be brought to birth.

No existentialist ever believes in a Utopia, and neither did Melville. Those who regard *Typee* as a sort of primitive Utopia are sadly mistaken. The utopias only express a longing of man to find some ideal or aim to which he can abandon himself and, thereby, give a meaning to his existence. But, however promising they may be, they leave the man in the end disillusioned and frustrated. For the existentialists there is no simple, institutional solution for social problems. The problem of personal reconciliation of self to society is an endless task which every man must accomplish for himself as long as mankind exists.¹⁵ A utopia is a chimera, a vain expectation as it was for Tommo in *Typee*, and ". . . even the ideals of a perfect Christian society fall into the category of dreams"¹⁶ as they were for Taji in *Mardi*. Prophetically, indeed, Melville had declared ". . . that Talismanic principle which reconciles the world to the soul . . . has never been found."¹⁷ The contemporary existentialists who have witnessed the devastating effects of totalitarian regimes which promise easy satisfaction for the craving of feeling "at home" in the world, remind us that there is no shortcut to happiness. Even when the millions have been sacrificed in these totalitarian states, the ideal state continues to elude man. That Talismanic principle has never been found and perhaps never will be found. The search for the human ideal is Melville's major theme, which he explores with greater complexity and richness in *Mardi*, *Moby Dick*, and *Pierre*. *The Confidence Man* is Melville's final verdict on humanity, a bitter satire on the greedy, godless industrialized society, where man is left with no saving graces, where

¹⁴Clifton Fadiman (introduction), Herman Melville, *Typee*, p. xviii.

¹⁵Ernest Breisbach, *Introduction to Modern Existentialism*, p. 227.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 228.

¹⁷Herman Melville, *Pierre*, p. 290.

every man is a "con" man, where the godly and the ungodly stand on the same dialectic—an amazingly true and terrifying picture of the twentieth century man.

The thesis of *Typee* is as follows:

In a primitive state of society, the enjoyments of life, though few and simple, are spread over a great extent, and are unalloyed; but Civilization, for every advantage she imparts, holds a hundred evils in reserve¹⁸

Typee is an indictment of Civilization in the most simple, direct, eloquent, and passionate terms; *The Confidence Man* is the restatement of the same thesis in a more hidden, veiled, symbolic, complex style, threatening, and somber in tone; full of sarcasm and bitter irony, shadowing forth the terrors and horrors of Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World*, a world that has come too soon as Huxley himself has pointed out in *The Brave New World Revisited*.

No wonder the contemporary existentialists have violently protested against the civilized barbarism of inhuman and indifferent mechanized civilization. Technology may multiply material comforts, but as Marcel points out ". . . these techniques are unable to save man himself."¹⁹ Nietzsche turned to Buddhism, Melville to Oriental philosophies, and the contemporary existentialists to Zen Buddhism, with one object: to seek refuge from the anonymity of the mechanized culture. They all plead for a simpler, less complicated, and a more meditative mode of existence. They are all terrified by the technologically oriented society of "I-It" that is swiftly superseding Buber's world of "I-Thou," a society in which there are no individuals, but, as Melville foreshadowed in *The Confidence Man*, anonymous beings as "man with a grey suit," "a man with a weed," "a man with gold sleeve-buttons," soulless men without hearts, and humanity preying on each other.

And yet it is surprising that a reputed critic should consider the thesis of *Typee* as "stale" and "questionable."²⁰ Had the world improved for the better, had the twentieth century man reached that state of thrice blessedness, free from the prison of his self-created ideologies, secure from the danger of Frankenstein's monster, who recoils back on his own creators, then the thesis of *Typee* would have been stale, obsolete, and questionable.

In *Typee*, Melville has explored another existential theme, the theme of human freedom. For Melville, all institutionalized forms of social, political, and religious structures are but different forms of human enslavement. For this very reason he was highly critical of institutionalized religion and institutionalized democracy; he regarded them as a kind of gilded prison which man had created for himself. And no prison is worse than the prison of decided opinions.

¹⁸Melville, *Typee*, p. 134.

¹⁹Marcel, "On the Ontological Mystery," *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, William Barrett and Henry D. Aiken, eds., p. 377.

²⁰Fadiman, *op. cit.*, p. xx.

For Melville, *Typee* came to symbolize human freedom, a symbol for a nation free from foreign domination, and also free from the contaminating and polluting influence of white man's civilization.

So great was Melville's sympathy for these freedom-loving, innocent, and defenseless islanders that he was outraged by the drives of missionaries to evangelize the pagans, and by French aggressors to civilize the savages. What use was religion to these carefree islanders who knew no wants, no worries, no cares, no griefs, for whom ". . . all life was mirth, fun, and high good humor."²¹ They belonged to that class of privileged people on whom the ". . . penalty of the Fall presses very lightly";²² knowing no want, they had no need for a religion, for ". . . God is created in a time of dearth."²³ He admired the Typees for their carefree existence governed only by the law of common sense and ". . . thrice mysterious taboo;"²⁴ bound together by ". . . strong ties of affection."²⁵

He admired the Typee women for their natural, healthy, and normal existence, particularly Fayaway, the child of nature. Fayaway is a partly real and partly fanciful creation of Melville's imagination, a symbol of femininity that has completely vanished from the industrialized society. She had left such a deep impression on Melville that she appears as Yillah in *Mardi* and as Isabel in *Pierre*.

Melville was surprised that ". . . white civilized man, the most ferocious animal on the face of the earth,"²⁶ should call the Typees savages, ferocious, and vindictive in war. Wherein lies the savagery of Typees whose battles were won at the total expense of ". . . four musket shots" and ". . . the total loss of one finger and a part of a thumb nail," as compared to the ". . . vindictiveness with which the white civilized men carry out [their] wars," not to speak of the misery and desolation that follow in their train.²⁷

Melville was horrified by the French atrocities committed on the Marquesan natives, under the flimsy pretext of setting up a puppet king as the rightful successor to the throne. He was shocked that the French used ". . . four double banked frigates and three corvettes to frighten a parcel of naked heathens into subjection,"²⁸ and the inhumanity of Rear Admiral DuPetit Thousars for using ". . . sixty-eight pounders to demolish huts of coco-nut boughs, and Congreve rockets to set on fire a few canoe sheds"²⁹—an outright infraction on the rights of humanity.

Melville's condemnation of French colonialism and missionary movements aroused so much antagonism at home and abroad that these comments had to be deleted from the second edition of *Typee*. But it

²¹Melville, *Typee*, p. 136.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 210.

²³Stanley R. Hopper, "On the Naming of the Gods in Holderlin and Rilke," *Christianity and the Existentialists*, Carl Michalson, ed., p. 156.

²⁴Melville, *Typee*, p. 192.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 220.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 134.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 134 ff.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁹*Loc cit.*

goes without saying that Melville in his very first novel appears as a champion of human freedom, reveals a fervor for reform—qualities which all the contemporary existentialists share with him. With full freedom as a writer, he addressed himself to the freedom of his readers, for which his contemporary readers were not prepared. The nineteenth century marks the triumph of the middle class in Europe and America. This class, as Sartre points out in *What is Literature*, expected its writers to reflect back a comforting image of the social, moral, political, and religious values of the middle class, the class which, with the aid of technology, had just stepped into an era of unlimited prosperity and expansion.³⁰ Melville's shattering criticism of its fake ideologies and sham values was a blow to its pride. This also partially explains why Melville's works were not so well received by this smug society.

Mardi opens as an exciting sea story like *Typee* and *Omoo* and, with a few hints, turns into an allegory, much to the surprise of Melville's readers. Tommo of *Typee*, the ". . . prototype of the Melvillian rover, the man destined for an endless voyage,"³¹ reappears as Taji in *Mardi*, again jumps ship and moves westward in an open boat. After many exciting adventures he arrives at a new microcosm much vaster than the Marquesan Islands. The archipelago of *Mardi* is a world made up of many small islands. What seemed like ". . . lands on lands, stretched far away in infinite perspective" and ". . . towering above all, and mid-most, rose a mighty peak," all ". . . grouped within a milk white zone of reef, so vast that in the distance all was dim."³² In this partly symbolic setting the whole action of the novel takes place. As soon as the hero passes through the Mardian reef, it becomes clear that his goal and journey are intellectual. Just as the setting is symbolic, in the same way the characters and journey to the various isles of *Mardi* are partly symbolical and partly allegorical. As the novel moves on, symbolism thickens and ambiguities multiply. Taji ". . . sails the heaven like earth itself"³³ in quest of that principle of harmony which he had found and lost in Yillah.

The search for Yillah, the symbol of beauty, harmony or Truth or ideal human condition, is started with the help of Media (Mind or Intellect), Babbalanja (Philosophy), Mohi (History), and Yoomy (Poetry). Everyone was anxious to take the tour of the archipelago, particularly Babbalanja ". . . in quest of some object mysteriously hinted."³⁴ Media and Yoomy were confident that Yillah would be found, but not so sure were Babbalanja and Mohi.

With the beginning of the expedition, Melville puts the allegory into the service of satire, pointing out the failings of the world that nowhere harbors Yillah. The voyagers note the shortcomings of all political systems, social and cultural patterns, dogmatic claims of church;

³⁰Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, p. 61.

³¹Charles Feidelson, Jr., *Symbolism and American Literature*, p. 166.

³²Herman Melville, *Mardi and A Voyage Thither*, p. 141.

³³Feidelson, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

³⁴Melville, *Mardi*, p. 174.

everywhere society is found to be stupid and least desirable. So thoroughly has Melville exposed the evils of the nineteenth century that it is called the *Gulliver's Travels* of the Mid-Nineteenth Century.³⁵

In *Mardi* almost all existential themes are present, though some like religion and freedom receive a fuller treatment than others. In this partly allegorical, partly symbolical, and partly satirical novel, there is not a question which Melville has not touched upon, any folly that he has not exposed, any conviction that he has not challenged. In fact, everything that is between heaven and earth falls within the scope of *Mardi*. And yet, like an existentialist, Melville admits that so irreducible and complex are the ambiguities of the world that ". . . an exclamation point is entire *Mardi's* autobiography."³⁶ Here and elsewhere in the novel, Melville admits that human intellect or reason, because of its limitation, can never unravel the mysteries of the world, a sharp criticism of idealists like Hegel, who claimed that the world can be mastered and controlled by reason. Equally mysterious and rootless is the being who is forced to make his home in the world. "Mardi is not our home. Up and down we wander, like exiles transported to a planet afar . . . not a light and gaysome world. Let us depart. But whither? Hard to live; hard to die; intolerable suspense."³⁷ This passage reveals what Heidegger and Sartre term as the abandonment of man in a meaningless universe, and Jaspers refers to as the "homelessness" of man.

Also present in *Mardi* are the Heideggerian and Sartrean interpretations of "existence precedes essence" as Sartre puts it. According to Sartre, since man is not a part of any cosmic scheme, he is completely free and in his concrete existence: "here and now" lies his essence. For Heidegger, concrete existence in space, time, and history only indicates existence; but what man can become, or ought to be, constitutes his essence. In Sartrean-like manner Taji declares, "All Mardi exists by virtue of my sovereign pleasure, and when I die the universe will perish with me,"³⁸ or, "our souls belong to our bodies, not our bodies to our souls."³⁹

In Heideggerian manner, Babbalanja says, "I am intent upon the essence of things; the mystery that lieth beyond . . . that which is beneath the seeming . . . I probe the circle's center; I seek to evolve the inscrutable."⁴⁰ But, paradoxically enough, Babbalanja's search for the inscrutable becomes the quest of Taji. The philosopher, realizing the absurdity of man's condition—man's unlimited desire and his limited possibilities—strikes a compromise with life and says ". . . that I myself exist, and that I can most happily or least miserably exist, by the practice of righteousness. All else is in the clouds and naught else may I learn, till the firmament be split from horizon to horizon."⁴¹ Sartre expresses the

³⁵Stephen A. Larrabee, "Melville Against the World," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, XXIV (October, 1935), p. 416.

³⁶Melville, *Mardi*, p. 510.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 548.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 425.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 440.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 305.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 373.

same views when he argues that since God does not exist, ". . . man cannot find anything to depend upon either within or without," so he must learn to live by the rule of his own integrity, honesty, and humanity.⁴²

Still more clearly, Melville insists upon man's responsibility. "In all things, man's own battles man must himself fight . . . since Oro [or God] champions none."⁴³

Surprisingly enough, the term "existence" as the contemporary existentialist interprets it, is also defined by Melville in *Mardi*. "To exist, is to be; to be, is to be something; to be something . . . there is no place but the universe, no limit but the limitless, no bottom but the bottomless . . .,"⁴⁴ indicating the infinite possibilities of man within the human universe.

And yet what is man? Taji, in Job-like manner, says, "Oh stars! Oh eyes that see me whereso'er I roam; serene intent, inscrutable for aye, tell me Sybils what am I-."⁴⁵ Or as Babalanja, baffled by the mystery of man says,

Are we angels or dogs? Oh, Man, Man, Man! Thou art harder to solve, than the Integral Calculus—yet plain as a primer; harder to find than the philosopher's stone—yet ever at hand . . . soul and body glued together, firm as atom to atom . . . I give thee up, oh Man! Thou art twain—yet indivisible; all things—yet a poor unit at best.⁴⁶

Tillich's definition of man as "concrete infinity," a finite who participates in infinity, very clearly expresses Melville's viewpoint.

Sartre's concept of man's encounter with nothingness is expressed by Melville in the following way:

Man bounds out of darkness, runs, babbles in the sun; then returns to his darkness again. Though peradventure, once more to emerge.⁴⁷

The last line expresses a yearning for immortality or Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence; or, ". . . backward or forward eternity is the same; already have we been the nothing we dread to be."⁴⁸

From this horrifying vacuum of nothingness, Nietzsche sought refuge in the doctrine of eternal recurrence, but Melville pushed the argument to its logical conclusion and found no such hopes in the hereafter. For Heidegger, for whom God is painfully absent, and Sartre, for whom God is dead, like Melville, accept "nothingness" as a part of man's contingency and facticity yet insist upon commitment and involvement for the benefit of all mankind. Melville believes that the only explanation and cogent reason for belief in immortality is that man desires it, with the implication that religion is a creation of man and exists by virtue of satisfying man's craving for immortality; for he says, ". . . universe can wax old without

⁴²Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism and Humanism," *French Philosophers From Descartes to Sartre*, Leonard M. Marsak, ed., p. 485.

⁴³Melville, *Mardi*, p. 468.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 398-400.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 378.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 205.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 208.

us," and ". . . eternity is not ours by right; and alone unrequited suffering here, form no title thereto, unless resurrections are reserved for the maltreated brutes," for ". . . suffering is suffering, be the sufferer man, brute or thing." He further cautions to ". . . stifle all vain speculations" of rewards and punishments, and we need not be told ". . . what is righteousness," for ". . . we are all born with the whole Law in our hearts," and that instead of fighting over creeds, ". . . let us do, let us act, here, here fellowmen where we can better minister as angels rather than in heaven, where want and misery come not."⁴⁹

On these grounds Melville attacks ". . . dogmatic and fraudulent claims of church organization" of possessing the ". . . exclusive ownership of true doctrine or of divinely granted power over souls of men."⁵⁰ So Pani, the blind priest of Maramma, gets a full share of chastisement. For these very reasons Nietzsche described "Christianity as the metaphysics of the hangman . . ." ⁵¹ and exulted in releasing man from the tyranny of the church. Melville's own religious views are perhaps best expressed in the religious convictions of the fifth pilgrim who wanted to reach the Temple of Oro (God) without the aid of the blind priest, Pani. He was the most truly religious of all pilgrims who sought God without the help of Church, and, in rejecting its aid, he stood condemned by it. He sought Oro not with faith but with hope, not with fear but with love, not with a feeling of self abasement and self degradation but with the pride of man who in being God's creature was worthy of standing before Him.⁵²

Though Melville was primarily a novelist, yet in his religious thinking he has close affinities with Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. All three attacked priests, whom Nietzsche called the ". . . parasitical human type of hypocrites and anointed world traducers,"⁵³ for misleading people from the true spirit of Christianity. Nietzsche believed, "Christianity merely expressed the basic truths of heart . . .,"⁵⁴ for Melville, Christianity was a feeling of external felicity, but the priests had so distorted the truth that ". . . religion now is at variance with the dictates of the heart."⁵⁵ Ever since the attacks of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche on institutionalized Christianity, religious thinking has undergone a profound change in the twentieth century.

In *Typee*, Melville had attacked the French policy of colonialism. In *Mardi*, by the same token, he highly disapproved the empire-building plans of Bello, the King of Dominora (England), who was always meddling with the affairs of the neighboring Kings of Porpheero (Europe) and ". . . continually exploring in quest of some strange

⁴⁹*Ibid.* p. 507.

⁵⁰Tyrus Hillway, *Herman Melville*, p. 80.

⁵¹Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols," *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, p. 500.

⁵²Melville, *Mardi*, p. 300.

⁵³Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche and Christianity*, trans. E. B. Ashton, p. 2.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵⁵Melville, *Mardi*, p. 303.

empires."⁵⁶ He also warned Vivenza (America) not to extend her area too widely and to respect the freedom of neighboring nations.⁵⁷

For all his love and pride for "noble Vivenza," his nationalism was tempered with a dash of good sense and a dark glance at slavery, which he considered as ". . . a sin, a blot, foul as the crater pool of hell."⁵⁸ He was highly critical of the "dogmatically democratic" democracy, under which, instead of felicity, tyranny can prevail. In the anonymous proclamation he challenges the youthful idealism of the so-called ". . . kings and keepers of the great Temple of Freedom."⁵⁹ It is full of thought-provoking declarations.

Civilization has not ever been the brother of equality. . . . It is not the prime end, and chief blessing, to be politically free. And freedom is only good as a means; is no end in itself Freedom is more social than political. And its real felicity is not to be shared. . . . Better be secure under one king, than exposed to violence from twenty millions of monarchs, though oneself be of the number.⁶⁰

All contemporary existentialists share Melville's disapproval of colonialism, fascism, imperialism, and all forms of totalitarian types of governments. And, like Melville, they also believe that true freedom is something to be experienced individually and not collectively. They also share Melville's apprehensions and fears about democracy. For some existentialists, group decision is not *ipso facto* democratic; and, if democracy means collective ruling, then it must be rejected. But, if democracy means an individual's choice and willing participation in group action, then it is more acceptable. But, all the same, they highly disapprove of all levelling and socializing processes aimed at creating equality. Like Melville, Nietzsche, too, was rather suspicious about equality among all men when he declared, "Men are not equal. Nor shall they become equal."⁶¹ The existentialists demand freedom for all; but they, at the same time, insist upon the individuality of man, and all equalizing processes, in the final analysis, kill individuality, breed mental passivity, and social conformity. And conformity is not freedom.

We have briefly pointed out Melville's views on freedom within the context of social and political backgrounds. Melville has also illustrated in *Mardi* the ontological dimension of human freedom which is inextricably connected with existential choices. A choice is a decision and courage to act "in spite of"; and every choice, according to Jaspers, implies a "limit situation." When a man through existential despair reaches that limit, he is ready for a "leap"; this leap can be a "leap into faith" (Kierkegaard), or a leap into nothingness and suicide. Just as ". . . mystics," Camus points out, "find freedom by losing themselves in their god, by accepting his rules become secretly free,"—so the ". . . absurd

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 412.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 408.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, p. 469.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, p. 449.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, pp. 461-462.

⁶²Nietzsche, "Thus Spake Zarathustra," *The Portable Nietzsche*, p. 213.

man in turning to death feels released from everything outside . . . ”⁶² In either case this “leap” is an answer to their quest for meaning in existence. Faith, as the religious existentialists interpret it, is not merely a theoretical affirmation of an uncertain truth but the existential and resolute acceptance of something which transcends human experience. But Taji, Melville’s first “absurd” hero, refuses to accept the limitations of human finitude and by an act of negating life gives a positive value to his existence. Taji’s passion to know the absolute, to bring the opaque universe within the compass of his rational understanding, to transcend the “. . . limits which have been set upon thought as thought,”⁶³ constitutes the essence of his “absurd” reasoning. To the “absurd” man, life is a matter of all or nothing; he prefers to die unreconciled to life rather than live in a world divested of meaning, illusions, and light. The absurd is born of the confrontation between the human longing for happiness and reason . . . “and the unreasonable silence of the world.”⁶⁴ Taji is Melville’s first “absurd” hero whose “first act of abdication” as a “supreme emperor of his soul” paves the way for Captain Ahab’s wilful defiance of all the powers that restrict his freedom. In *Moby Dick* the “absurd” man’s drama of passion, revolt, and freedom is played on a much vaster and grander scale.

At the end of the novel all searchers in the party (except Taji) who had individually identified Taji’s quest as their own, “. . . your pursuit is mine, noble Taji,”⁶⁵ finally decide to give up their search to settle down in Serenia (the land of primitive Christianity), not because they had found what they were seeking but, as Babbalanja aptly points out, “. . . within our hearts is all that we seek.”⁶⁶ Surely the cankerous worm is in man’s own heart and that is where it must be sought. And an act like Taji’s suicide is prepared within the silence of the heart.

Yoomy finds in Alma his quest for beauty, and Mohi, a rest and reward in old age. Babbalanja, the skeptic, is captivated by Serenia where, “Reason no longer domineers; but still doth speak.”⁶⁷ Media learns a new humility, a recognition of the limits of reason, and a less autocratic way of ruling. They all find in Serenia a tranquillity, a peace of mind that man can ever hope for; in short, they accept with humility what cannot be transcended by human experiences. But Taji, in rejecting Serenia, rejects God and all hope of ever attaining peace. For him, as for all existentialists, even Serenia falls short of the ideal harmony he was seeking; it was merely an illusory postulate for a happy life. This search receives its fullest treatment in Melville’s master work *Moby Dick*.

⁶²Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O’Brien, pp. 43-44.

⁶³Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” trans. Edgar Löhrner, *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* Vol. 3, p. 294.

⁶⁴Camus, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

⁶⁵Melville, *Mardi*, p. 174.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, p. 565.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, p. 599.

II

Moby Dick: Melville's Finest Commitment

"To produce a mighty book you must choose a mighty theme,"⁶⁸ wrote Melville. And, indeed, what could have been a mightier theme than the theme of human existence in its tragic splendour, which Melville chose for *Moby Dick*? *Moby Dick* is a dramatic statement on the human condition itself, a forceful portrayal of the sublimity, the frailty, and the ambivalence of human existence, in a language instinct with passion, vitality and poetic intensity. The world of *Moby Dick* is a world of radical human finitude, an amazingly authentic picture of the twentieth century world from which, according to Heidegger, God is painfully absent. It also signifies for Heidegger, a time of dearth; ". . . 'the old gods' have sunk into oblivion and 'the new God' has not yet appeared."⁶⁹ The absence of God means spreading of "nothingness," and in this encompassing gloom of "nothingness" man has lost his moorings and is painfully conscious of his "homelessness." Rarely in the genre of the English novel, has so sombre a philosophical theme of human finitude been integrated into the texture of a realistic prose and clothed in the magic and music of words as in Melville's *Moby Dick*.

In *Moby Dick* almost all the basic existential themes that we have already enumerated in the first part of this essay can be traced, though some are more apparent and more fully treated, some are merely hinted at, some flow like strong undercurrents only to emerge from time to time in the form of symbols, and some are implicit in the imagery itself. To the last category belongs the theme of death. Death is the recurring motif in *Moby Dick*; its uncanny presence is suggested through imagery which can be subjectively experienced by the reader from the very beginning of the novel. Toward the end it becomes a more objective, overpowering, and all-pervading force.

Similarly the themes of anguish and despair are implicit in Ahab's desperation and Ishmael's quest for meaning in existence. Existential anguish is discovered through immanence of existence, derived from the experience it helps to define, and experienced through self reflection.

Now a word about consciousness as the existentialists define it. For Sartre, borrowing the concept from Husserl's "intentionality of consciousness," there is no universe except the human universe and there is no dichotomy between the subject and object;⁷⁰ hence the universe is always a personal universe and it is revealed, explored, and interpreted through man's consciousness. Only through self reflection can man become aware of his being-in-the-world. It is through Ishmael's instantaneous eruptions of consciousness that the world is revealed in all its sadness and longing, despair and wonder. In *Moby Dick*, Melville seems to have used the

⁶⁸ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, p. 350.

⁶⁹ Kurt F. Reinhardt, *The Existential Revolt*, p. 142.

⁷⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, p. 60.

technique of stream-of-consciousness which was later fully exploited and developed by Henry James, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf.

The other theme which is deeply embedded in the very structure of the novel is "existence precedes essence." Ahab's revolt and rebellion against the inscrutable powers of nature that crush man's insatiable longing for truth, spring from his pride in his earthly existence as a man. As a man, he seems to argue, has he not accepted a ". . . life of toil and much suffering and many dangers,"⁷¹ and is it not his right to know the truth for ". . . truth has no confines."⁷² It is this simultaneous affirmation and negation of being-in-the-world which so much existential literature illustrates and explores.

Closely linked with the theme of man's being-in-the-world is the problem of free will and determinism. Is man absolutely free and very little bound by his past, as Sartre conceives him to be, or are his actions conditioned or predetermined by social, economic, and environmental conditions, as naturalists like Zola hold? The problem of free will and responsibility looms large in existential literature from Kierkegaard onward. In the light of twentieth century technological advancement, Kierkegaard's message to the modern age has become all the more meaningful. He says,

What is at stake, is the choice between the individual and the collective, between freedom and slavery, between Christ and Anti-christ. *Either*: the life of the individual person, a microcosm as the image of God, capable of free, responsible action, and therefore . . . a life of toil and much suffering and many dangers: *or*: the life of an impersonal, unfree member of a collective, without the possibility of independent knowledge and responsible action, a life in service of unknown forces—, and as compensation for the loss of freedom at best a false, illusory dream of material welfare in an earthly paradise which can never become a reality.⁷³

All existentialists have fought for the self-centered freedom of man. Melville had discussed this intricate problem in *Mardi*, and he touches upon it with greater subtlety in *Moby Dick*.

As a matter of fact, all existential themes, which in the final analysis are philosophical problems related to the being of man-in-the-world, are so closely interlocked that it is almost impossible to isolate them, for everything that falls within the ken of human consciousness becomes a part of man's being-in-the-world. It must also be kept in mind that Melville was primarily a philosophical novelist, not an academic philosopher whose chief business is to clarify and explain these philosophical concepts. A novelist, by necessity, has to restrict himself to one or two themes which would significantly shed light on the area of experience he wants to illuminate, but at the same time a philosophical novelist's preoccupation with the metaphysical problems is bound to creep into his works. This is precisely the reason why the novels of Melville and Dostoevsky are so fascinating to the modern reader. Their insight into

⁷¹Soren Kierkegaard, cited by Kurt F. Reinhardt, *The Existential Revolt*, p. 36.

⁷²Melville, *Moby Dick*, p. 139.

⁷³Kierkegaard, *loc. cit.*

the perennial problems of man's existence makes their work timeless in significance.

The central theme, which seems to dominate all other existential themes in *Moby Dick*, is the alienation and estrangement of the modern man, a theme which Melville had already explored in *Mardi*. But the failure of *Mardi*, his most ambitious novel, forced him to evolve a style which would disguise his metaphysical ideas as well as satisfy his readers. As a matter of fact, from the success of *Typee* and the failure of *Mardi*, Melville learned the subtle art of fusing the two diverse techniques of fiction writing in such a way that the end result was *Moby Dick*, a multidimensional novel which can be read as a highly exciting story about whale hunting as well as the spiritual odyssey of man. To be sure, Melville used the techniques of realism for exploring the "vital truth," and so all his novels are grounded within the framework of an experienced reality. But as he itched to go beneath the surface to apprehend ultimate reality, those skeletons of actual reality are instinct with significance.⁷⁴ Mason has rightly pointed out that after *Mardi*, Melville's realism is suspect; in *Moby Dick* even the most matter of fact scientific information on whales is instinct with "unusual suggestiveness."⁷⁵

Mardi and *Moby Dick* have the same theme and form: the alienation of man and his quest for meaning in an existence having the form of a hazardous journey. Perhaps the most basic recurring theme in modern literature is aloneness and the lostness of man. The modern man lives amidst multitudes yet feels isolated and "homeless." Aloneness is not an idea but an encountered reality, an awareness of being lost in a meaningless universe. It is a severance from a world which contains hope and love and goodness as impossible possibilities, and such aloneness is anguish. This feeling of isolation and "homelessness" of the modern man, according to Heidegger, whose own philosophical thought after *Being and Time* has been considerably influenced by the works of the poet Holderlin, expresses the spiritual alienation of man from his "Being" and an intense longing for "home." "Homelessness" means the time of dearth, when God has died and sufferings are not understood and life becomes meaningless—hence a search for God or a naming of the Gods. Homecoming symbolizes the return of the spiritually alienated man to his "home," but home is not easy to gain, because the familiar still remains remote. Homecoming is, therefore, still a journey, and home is the point to which we are perpetually returning, not yet aware of what is authentically latent in us or unaware of the image of God who is already coming to meet us—"That which thou seekest is near and already coming to meet thee."⁷⁶ For what we seek in the world is already within us, and what we see in the world is the reflection of our own image. This point has been admirably illustrated by Melville, as we may dis-

⁷⁴Allen Hayman, "The Real and the Original: Melville's Theory of Prose Fiction," *Modern Fiction Studies* VIII, 3 (Autumn, 1962), pp. 221-231.

⁷⁵Ronald Mason, *The Spirit Above The Dust: A Study of Herman Melville*, p. 50.

⁷⁶Stanley Romaine Hopper, "On the Naming of Gods in Holderlin and Rilke," *Christianity and the Existentialists*, Carl Michalson, ed., pp. 151-158.

cover, by comparing the attitudes of Ahab and Ishmael to the world of reality they meet.

In *Moby Dick*, Melville has shown aloneness and anguish as the conditions of human existence. *Moby Dick* opens and ends with loneliness. Ishmael is discovered alone on land; he is left at the conclusion of the tragedy alone upon the sea. Melville's choice of name for his protagonist, through whose consciousness the entire tragic drama of life is unfolded, and the mood to open and end the story cannot be other than deliberate.⁷⁷ In the loneliness of Ishmael, Melville has raised the loneliness of man to the infinite. Man's loneliness and isolation are again pointed out when Ishmael boards the *Pequod*, the microcosm of the world. He notices the motley crew gathered from all parts of the world, representing all mankind, even though ". . . now confederated along one keel, each isolate living on a separate continent."⁷⁸ And old Ahab, in his wilful isolation from humanity, is perhaps the greatest of all "isolatoes."

Behind the loneliness of Ishmael, who finds no meaning in existence, and Ahab's tragic defiance of fate, ". . . is the fear that man's covenant with God has been broken."⁷⁹ Ahab's cry ". . . who is to doom when the judge himself is dragged to the bar,"⁸⁰ clearly indicates his awareness of the death of old gods and a desperate need for signing a new covenant written in the heart with a new God. For "God alone," as Reinhardt points out, ". . . is man's origin, ground, and end. He is also the guarantor of man's ultimate perfection and happiness and in Him alone the restless human heart can find abiding rest."⁸¹ In the absence of God human existence shrinks and withers away into meaninglessness and absurdity. This precisely is the tragic situation of Ishmael and Ahab. Both seek refuge from the spiritual vacuum created by the silence of God and the horrifying abyss of nothingness. Ahab drives over oceans in pursuit of his ever-fleeing goal; Ishmael plunges inward and takes the longest journey into inwardness. Their tragic dilemma, which the modern man experiences with the same intensity, is restated in these words of Dag Hammarskjöld:

What I ask for is the absurd; that life shall have a meaning
What I strive for is impossible: that my life shall acquire a meaning
I dare not believe, I do not see how I shall ever be able to believe
that I am not alone.⁸²

Life will forever be meaningless and absurd for modern man as long as "God withholds his presence" and "holy names are lacking."⁸³

Both Ishmael and Ahab are anguished and spiritually bewildered by a cold, impersonal, and indifferent universe. Both are powerful projections of Melville's own personality. Ahab, the grand "Ungodly god-like man" with "a crucifixion in his face," the Captain of the *Pequod*, is all

⁷⁷Mason, *op. cit.*, pp. 111-112.

⁷⁸Melville, *Moby Dick*, p. 108.

⁷⁹Alfred Kazin (ed.), Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, p. x.

⁸⁰Melville, *Moby Dick*, p. 410.

⁸¹Reinhardt, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

⁸²Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, trans. Leif Sjöberg and W. H. Auden, p. 86.

⁸³Reinhardt, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

passion, revolt, and action; and it is from his energy, push, and drive that *Moby Dick* derives its nervous vitality and pulsating vigor. Ishmael, the lonesome sailor, is all thought and meditation, and it is through his Hamlet-like meditations that he illuminates the world around him and thus becomes a mirror for mankind. These two represent the alternate rhythms of the novel—one reflective, the other forceful.⁸⁴ Between them they present a sweeping vision of a dynamically moving and expanding, threatening and alarming, universe.

Ishmael, the sailor lost in contemplation, and Ahab, the embodiment of pride and hatred, are pitted against the ferocious malignity of the White Whale. By the sheer force of his creative imagination, Melville has attended the level of universality: on the one hand the god-like man in his wilful pride, on the other the god-like beast in his instinctive and hateful strength.⁸⁵ Thus the three main strands of the novel, Ishmael, Ahab, and the White Whale, are fused, integrated, and universalized.

Moby Dick is sheer brute force of nature, inscrutable, malicious, and vindictive by instinct. But Ahab and Ishmael represent the "aristocracy of intellect."⁸⁶ Yet to think is to stir up paradoxes, become aware of ambiguities and uncertainties that cannot be resolved by reason. Ishmael, who has experienced the deep agony of the human heart by the eternal contradictions in life, is a seeker of that principle which reconciles the human heart to the world. He wants only to know the truth, not possess it. But Ahab burns with passion to possess the absolute and unconditional truth; he wants to reduce the universe to human understanding and stamp it with his seal. Ahab's ". . . nostalgia for unity [and] . . . appetite for the absolute,"⁸⁷ illustrate his absurd reasoning and the essential tragedy of the modern man.

For man the world arises to be known, to be judged, to be embraced; but knowledge, judgment, and love remain fugitive entities. Man yearns for justification, but the world in itself is unreasonable and refuses to disclose its secrets. What is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. From the moment the absurd is recognized, it binds them together as only hatred can weld two creatures together. Reason is important when it hears this cry from the heart; but since mind, once aroused by this insistence, seeks and finds nothing but contradictions and paradoxes, men like Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, and contemporary existentialists have persistently sought truth through the irrational.⁸⁸ And this, precisely, is the mode followed by Ahab. What he seeks is not the White Whale but the symbol of that absolute and unconditional truth; and what he hates (" . . . be the White Whale agent or be the White Whale principal . . . ")⁸⁹ is its in-

⁸⁴Alfred Kazin, *op. cit.*, p. viii.

⁸⁵Mason, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

⁸⁶Alfred Kazin, *op. cit.*, p. x.

⁸⁷Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans., Justin O'Brien, p. 13.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 16-21.

scrutable powers that smothers this longing for clarity. What is absurd here is that God can never justify his creation as long as evil exists in this world. How is it possible to understand the sufferings of the innocent? How is it ever possible for man to strive for moral order in view of the sharkishness of nature? Both seem to say with Ivan Karamazov, "All I know is that there is suffering and that there are none guilty." Ahab goes still further in his protest and joins Ivan in his cry, "I must have justice or I will destroy myself."⁸⁰

Both Ishmael and Ahab feel that "This world is an imperfect image of an eternal contradiction—a drunken joy for its imperfect creator"⁸¹—a feeling shared by Sartre and Camus. Ishmael, in his abhorrence for institutionalized Christianity and the man-made image of a tyrannical and revengeful God, identifies "Ahab's quenchless feud"⁸² as his own. He also observes with sarcasm that life with all its worryings, sudden disaster, peril of life, limb and death is a "practical joke," played by ". . . an unseen and unaccountable old joker."⁸³ With all his doubts and misgivings about God, Ishmael recoils from the fear and terror of the White Whale; for him "whiteness" is a ". . . colorless all-color of atheism from which we all shrink."⁸⁴ But Ahab, who had linked the miseries and sufferings of mankind from Adam downwards with the malicious and inscrutable powers of nature, vented all his hatred on the White Whale, because for him "whiteness" was a veil of Christian Deity.⁸⁵ Ahab's monomaniac determination to kill Moby Dick stems not so much from a passion for personal revenge for the loss of his leg, but from his conviction that by the White Whale's death, ". . . all the world may be secured";⁸⁶ as he confides to Starbuck, "I feel deadly faint, bowed and humped as if I were Adam staggering beneath the piled centuries . . . Let me look into a human eye [rather than] . . . gaze upon God."⁸⁷ In this context Ahab becomes the symbol of the liberator of mankind and reminds us of Nietzsche, who exulted in liberating man from "Christianity, the metaphysics of the hangman."⁸⁸ The grand old man, the "noble soul" as Starbuck calls him, may have ruled his crew like a dictator, but he was outraged by the indifference of gods at the suffering of an innocent man, like Pip; "Lo ye believers in gods all goodness, and in man all ill, lo you! See you the omniscient gods oblivious of suffering of man and man though idiotic . . ." ⁸⁹ He was tortured by the dialectic of love and hatred. The more he hated Moby Dick, the more intense was his craving for security and love. The psychoanalysts have proved that

⁸⁰Melville, *Moby Dick*, p. 139.

⁸¹Feodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, cited by Maurice Natanson, *Literature, Philosophy and Social Sciences*, p. 128.

⁸²Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans., Walter Kaufmann, p. 143.

⁸³Melville, *Moby Dick*, p. 150.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, p. 186.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, p. 383.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, p. 409.

⁸⁹Nietzsche, *op. cit.*, p. 500.

⁹⁰Melville, *Moby Dick*, p. 394.

love and hatred are not two polarities, but rather dual aspects of the same feeling that stems from the same deep emotion.

What ultimately both Ishmael and Ahab were interested in, was the re-establishment of the relatedness between man and God. The God they hated was the God whose death Nietzsche announced and Sartre is repudiating—the concept of a paper cutter or a superior sort of an artisan.¹⁰⁰ For Heidegger, to proclaim God as “the highest value” is the degradation of the essence of God because it is like accepting what is evaluated only as a mere object for the appreciation of man. But God as being transcends all values comprehensible to man.¹⁰¹ The dead God of Nietzsche is “. . . the scurrilous specter that is satirized by Kierkegaard and Ibsen . . . the God of a complacent society, who has been divested of all his majesty and power and reduced to a conniving helper of man in the attainment of his selfish desires.”¹⁰² When the old names of God become so hardened, systematized, and formalized, man is trapped beneath the narrowing objectivity of his own projected image and thus abandoned to wander his homeless ways.¹⁰³

Ishmael expresses his need for a personal God when he says, “Our souls are like orphans . . . Where is the foundling’s father hidden? Where lies the final harbor whence we unmoor no more?”¹⁰⁴ Ahab, too, expresses this urge: “Come in thy lowest form and I will kneel and kiss thee . . .”¹⁰⁵ Ishmael and Ahab’s vital need, as well as the need of their creator, is well expressed by Nietzsche in his unforgettable poem, “To The Unknown God.”

I would know, Unknown One
Thou who grips deep into my soul
Wandering through my life like a storm
Thou inconceivable, my kin
I would know Thee, even serve Thee.¹⁰⁶

Momentary, indeed, were such flashes of Ahab’s humility, but all men tragically great are made so through a certain morbidity. Ahab, with all the demonic pride and wilfulness which he asserted as a man, was not without his humanities. His befriending of Pip, who had wandered from all mortal reason, his shedding of a “. . . wee drop of a tear into the sea”¹⁰⁷ [the richest wealth the Pacific ever contain’d], when the lovely aromas of the enchanted air seemed to dispel the “cankrous thing in his soul,”¹⁰⁸ prove his humanity. Indeed, the worm is in man’s heart and that is where it must be sought. For once Ahab seemed to have been “. . . overcome with the caresses of that step-mother-world, so long cruel—forbidding [which] threw affectionate arms

¹⁰⁰Sartre, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.

¹⁰¹Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” trans., Edgar Lohner, *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, Vol. 3 pp. 292-293.

¹⁰²Reinhardt, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

¹⁰³Heppner, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

¹⁰⁴Melville, *Moby Dick*, p. 375.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, p. 384.

¹⁰⁶Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz: Five Lectures*, trans., William Earle, p. 35.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*, p. 408.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*

round his stubborn neck and did seem to joyously sob over him . . . as if in her heart to save and bless . . . " him.¹⁰⁹ Had he only realized that the universe, too, like man, can love and suffer, hope and despair, he would have been reconciled. But no, his intellect only convinced him that nature " . . . paints herself like a harlot,"¹¹⁰ only to defeat man's highest aspirations. His "absurd" reasoning confirmed his belief, as he confides to Starbuck, at the end of the second day's chase, that this " . . . act [was] immutably decreed. "T'was rehearsed by thee and me, a billion years before this sea rolled," and that he was only . . . the Fates' Lieutenant," acting under orders.¹¹¹ The more madly and persistently he followed Moby Dick, the more convinced he became that he was chained to the whale by irrevocable bonds of Fate. As if driven by some malicious unseen powers, he pushed forward to meet his adversary. Starbuck advises him to give up the mad chase: "See Moby Dick seeks thee not. It is thou that madly seekest him."¹¹² But neither Starbuck's reasoning nor Pip's pleas, "O master, my master, come back,"¹¹³ could stop him from his monomaniac pursuit. After three days' chase he finally prefers " . . . [a] lonely death on [a] lonely life,"¹¹⁴ and with a harpoon in his hand he rolls himself toward the " . . . all destroying but unconquering whale"¹¹⁵ and thus forever chains himself to the unknown one. In his revolt against the inscrutable powers he not only brought disaster on the entire crew of the *Pequod* but also abdicated what is most precious to man—his life.

Ahab's tragedy is the tragedy of human intellect, intellect which in its boundless passion for absolute freedom and complete synthesis revolts against human finitude. Such a passion can spring only from the deepest wells of human loneliness and homelessness. In transcending its limitations, intellect forges weapons that not only destroy man's humanity but ultimately strikes at the very roots of human existence.

Ahab's suffering was suffering in "bad faith" (Sartre); for him there was no "homecoming," no "leap" into authentic existence. Even his suicidal act that involved the entire crew was no solution to his problem. He failed to realize that if the universe is absurd, so is man, and that, as a matter of fact, the eternal contradiction lies in man's own heart. The image which Ahab saw in the world and could not bear, is what Narcissus saw—himself. In his revolt against the limitations of human finitude, he perfectly illustrates Sartre's desperate conclusion, "man is a useless passion."¹¹⁶

The tragic flaw in Ahab's character, besides his "fatal pride," lay in his quest for absolute freedom without responsibility and without a sense of commitment. In his demonic pursuit of such freedom he de-

¹⁰⁹*Loc. cit.*

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 163.

¹¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 422.

¹¹²*Ibid.*, p. 428.

¹¹³*Ibid.*, p. 426.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 430.

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 431.

¹¹⁶Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel F. Barnes, p. 615.

liberately isolated himself from humanity. He himself clarifies his own position:

Oh Life! Here I am proud as a Greek god and yet standing debtor to this blockhead for a bone to stand on! Cursed be the mortal inter-debtedness which will not do away with ledgers. I would be free as air; and I am down in the whole world's books.¹¹⁷

Such absolute freedom without commitment that Ahab aspired to, belongs only to gods or monsters like Frankenstein's, not to man, the most helpless and defenseless of all creatures. No philosophy demands so much individual freedom as existentialism, and no philosophy makes freedom such a heavy burden as existentialism; for in choosing for oneself, one chooses for all mankind (whether one likes it or not), in the image of what man ought to be. Every choice is made in a situation, and every situation involves others and mankind in general. No man can ever attain perfection or happiness by trampling over the rights of mankind. Sartre's concept of total freedom and total responsibility is derived from Dostoevsky's famous statement, "If God didn't exist, everything would be permissible." For most of us God does exist and everything is not permissible. Sartre finds the non-existence of God rather distressing, because all possibility of finding values has disappeared with Him. For Sartre, just because God does not exist, man is condemned to be free. He cannot find anything within or without to cling to and, as a consequence, must assume the total responsibility of his own choices and actions. He can make no excuses to anyone for his failure, for there is no determinism and no Fate that controls man's destiny.

In the light of Sartre's theory that there is no determinism and no Fate that controls man's destiny, how do we explain Ahab's acts? To be sure, like all Melville's heroes, he is an individualist, and is the one who talks most about being dominated by Fate or some other uncontrollable spiritual force. He continually refers to himself as the "Fates' Lieutenant" and his acts as being preordained by some ". . . remorseless emperor . . . pushing and crowding and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart, I durst not so much as dare!"¹¹⁸ His fatalism is again expressed in his cry,

Is it, God, or who that lifts this arm . . . how can this one small heart beat; this one small brain think thoughts; unless God does that beating, does that thinking, does that living, and not I. . . . Fate is the handspike.¹¹⁹

Ahab's acts are not as predetermined as he thinks. On the contrary, his fate is woven before our eyes in a series of his human choices. His throwing away of his pipe into the sea, his sequestration from his crew, his stubborn refusal to listen to Starbuck's reasoning, his bribing of his crew to become accomplices to his crime, his forging of the special harpoon and tempering it with blood—these were not preordained acts,

¹¹⁷Melville, *Moby Dick*, p. 361.

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 409.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 410.

but acts of his own choice, which he made without taking into consideration his responsibility as the captain of his crew.

Melville, in giving unlimited freedom to Ahab, has turned him into a living and pulsating character who shares the qualities of Shakespeare's Lear and Macbeth. His undaunted pride, stemming from his absolute freedom, "mirrors back his own mysterious self"¹²⁰ in nature. Melville may have secretly shared Ahab's rebellion against the inscrutable powers of nature, his relentless pursuit to know the ultimate truth; but at the same time, Melville has taken pains to show the falseness of Ahab's posture. Ahab acted as if God were really dead and everything was possible and permissible, and as though he were not responsible for and to anyone, except to his self-centered self. Melville has condemned Ahab's shutting himself off from the brotherhood of man. The purpose of pointing out Ahab's irresponsibility and "bad faith" is to arouse a sense of responsibility and moral commitment to the welfare of humanity. However fascinating and awe-inspiring Ahab may be, Melville has not held him up for emulation and imitation. As a matter of fact, implicit in *Moby Dick* is the stern and universal warning that if men like Captain Ahab are entrusted with power to lead, nations can expect nothing but total disaster and ruin.

What is most remarkable in *Moby Dick* is Melville's perception of human suffering. Through Ahab's character he has sensitively shown that the mental agonies and the tortures of a man as a human being are not reserved for the righteous alone. Men like Ahab, even though acting in "bad faith," can suffer as intensely as the righteous ones like Ishmael and Starbuck. Nor do anguish and despair guarantee a "leap" into authentic existence; these become meaningful only when accompanied by a positive commitment to some positive value. This is exactly the point where a "staid steadfast" man like Starbuck failed. He wavered between his commitment to humanity at large and his commitment to one man—his captain. When placed in a situation demanding a choice between the two conflicting commitments, Starbuck, the good religious man, chose ". . . duty for the sake of duty and not for the sake of the author of the duty . . ." which would have him aware that personal involvement with humanity is more important than obeying a transcendent principle.¹²¹ In choosing for himself, he did not choose for all mankind; in proving true to his duty, he proved false to humanity.

Melville has, with great subtlety, pointed out the failure of men like Starbuck who, in making a sole commitment to some abstract virtue, negate the rights of humanity; for the sake of some vague reward in the world hereafter they forsake their commitment to the brotherhood of man.

Men like Starbuck, according to Kierkegaard's "Stages of Life," are still in the ethical state; for them duty and obedience to duty are the

¹²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 333.

¹²¹Thomas Gallagher, "Soren Kierkegaard," *Existential Thinkers and Thought*, Frederick Patka, ed., p. 80.

highest virtues in life. For such men, abstract duty or laws are more important than personal relationship with God. These men are, of course, superior to aesthetes whose focal point in life is the enjoyment of the pleasurable good, irrespective of its moral value. Stubb and Flask, in the Kierkegaardian sense, belong to the category of aesthetes whose guiding principle in life is to "live for pleasure" and for whom many realities of life, like evil, poverty, and sickness, have no aesthetic interest. They choose the momentary and immediate and live from moment to moment.¹²² Hence their life is as fractured as the life of man in the ethical state. The truly religious man, by establishing a personal relationship with the transcendental Deity, transcends the limitations of the aesthetic and ethical states of life.

In *Moby Dick* Melville has presented symbolically the different levels of human existence in terms of human consciousness. Ishmael, the revealing consciousness of *Moby Dick*, transcends not only the vision of Father Mapple and Starbuck, but, most signally, of Ahab. For Father Mapple, the representative of orthodox Christianity, "whiteness" is implicitly a color of beauty and purity; man, like Jonah, is always a sinner; the whale that first swallowed and then vomited Jonah is God's agent for punishment and forgiveness; and man's redemption lies in his strait obedience and repentance if he sins. Father Mapple's sermon is a commentary as well as a judgment on Ahab's actions. For Ahab the White Whale was an embodiment of evil. He cared not the least, ". . . be the White Whale agent or be the White Whale principal";¹²³ it was something to be destroyed, to be annihilated. For Starbuck, the whale is a demigorgon of Ahab and his heathenish crew, a horror from which he recoils in fear. Although he refuses to join his captain in wreaking revenge on a brute force of nature, yet with all his goodness he is unable to stop evil in Ahab. He finally resigns himself to his fate and faith, "Let faith oust fact, let fancy oust memory, I look deep down and do believe."¹²⁴

Ishmael makes us see the inadequacy of Father Mapple's determinism, Ahab's defiance of determinism, and Starbuck's absolute faith. The more he meditates on "linked analogies," the more he becomes aware of fatal deceptions. He is horrified by the "whiteness" of the white whale, a subtle inversion of the orthodox view of reality. With masterly balance Melville suggests, as Horsford has pointed out, "Ishmael's growing awareness of the desperate possibility of a universe simply being meaningless, where all analogies are only self deceptions."¹²⁵

Here we see the implications of Hume's philosophy, particularly the implications of his attack against the "argument from design," the so-called teleological proof which attempts to infer the existence, wisdom, and goodness of God from the order, beauty, and goodness of nature.

¹²²*Ibid.*, pp. 79-86.

¹²³*Ibid.*, p. 139.

¹²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 375.

¹²⁵Howard C. Horsford, "The Design of the Argument in *Moby Dick*," *Modern Fiction Studies* VIII, 3 (Autumn, 1962), p. 247.

Hume holds that all attempts to infer by analogy the nature of God from the nature of the universe must end in disaster. The purpose of nature seems to be the preservation and propagation of the species and not their happiness. Misery exceeds happiness in the world. The fact of pain in the world would prove that God is either not benevolent or not almighty. The existence of moral and physical evil does not allow us to infer a good God. The nature of the universe bears no resemblance to its creator, to whom we have piously ascribed every species of perfection. Hume also holds that human reason is too weak, too blind and limited, to speculate into two eternities, before and after the present state of things; into the creation and formation of the universe and the universal spirit existing without beginning and without end. He also holds that man's belief in God is not the result of speculative reasoning but is based on man's emotional and impulsive desire for security against future misery, terror, of death, and other vicissitudes. He also believed that religions are not made, but grow; theism has developed from polytheism. In Hume, rational cosmology is replaced by an organic conception of nature, and rational theology by a voluntaristic conception rooted in the will of man.¹²⁶ Hume's arguments seem to suggest the possibility that this universe and its creator may only be a symbolic reconstruction of our own minds.

When the universe is seen from this angle, Ishmael is forced to deny the validity of any "argument by design"—orthodox, transcendental, or satanic. Ishmael's ambivalent linking of the pastoral tranquility with the horrors of the oceans points to a world which is neither benevolent nor malevolent, just icily, glacially cold, impersonal, indifferent, purposeless, and meaningless.¹²⁷ Behind the inscrutable "whiteness" there may be nothing: "Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will . . . how comprehend his face, when face he has none?"¹²⁸

The universe Ishmael ultimately confronts is not very different from Heidegger's and Sartre's meaningless and purposeless universe. With great subtlety Melville develops Ishmael as the moral center, without displacing Ahab as the dramatic center, of the novel and thus provides an indispensable perspective. It is shaped by a recognition of the absurdity of man's placement in a purposeless universe. Since this is all there is, man must somehow make a life for himself. This is a certainty.

For Sartre, every being is alone, tragically alone, with no excuses behind him and no justification before him. Only through commitment can man transcend his loneliness. Ishmael is able to bear the burden of his loneliness through his commitment to the brotherhood of man. To be human is precisely to be aware of others as "human beings," a recognition and acceptance of man as a man; a capacity to enter into the "I-Thou" relationship, a permeating relationship of reciprocal fulfillment. Ahab's tragic development is his progressive, wilful isolation from humanity and

¹²⁶Frank Thilly, *A History of Philosophy*, pp. 378-381.

¹²⁷Horsford, *op cit.*, p. 248.

¹²⁸Melville, *Moby Dick*, p. 295.

humane values. On the other hand, Ishmael's increasing humanity, his communion, his commitment, his brotherhood with Queequeg, transcends all differences of caste, color, race, language, and nominal creed. He accepts Queequeg not as a son of God but because ". . . that man's a human being just as I am."¹²⁹ Queequeg's humanity can exist irrespective of any institutionalized ethic. It was the "soothing savage who redeemed the splintered heart and maddened hand" of Ishmael ". . . turned against the wolfish world," when he tried a "pagan friend" since "Christian kindness had proved but hollow courtesy."¹³⁰ Together Ishmael and Queequeg were shielded from the cold icy blasts of arctic winds. Ishmael's survival, ". . . buoyed up by the coffin"¹³¹ of Queequeg, also suggests the transcending nature of their fellowship and brotherhood. When Ahab and Starbuck are measured by the moral gauge of Ishmael's humanity and commitment to the brotherhood of man, both are found wanting.

Melville has brilliantly explored this theme of man's isolation and loneliness in *Moby Dick*. As an existentialist, his concern and love for man were deep: ". . . in the ideal . . . so sparkling . . . such a grand and glowing creature."¹³² Neither in theoretical reason, nor in institutionalized religion, nor in sentimentalism did Melville find any clue to the fundamental problem of man's loneliness. He was highly critical of all forms of institutionalized churches to which men paid lip service ("man's religion is one thing and this practical world another"),¹³³ but which no longer operated as a binding and dynamic force that gives shape and meaning to total existence. But infinite was his faith in that true religion which binds a Christian to a pagan and in doing so transcends all ethical, moral and religious dogmas. The nearest solution that he could find for the predicament of modern man was man's commitment to the brotherhood of man. Ishmael's loneliness at the conclusion of the tragedy also points to the fact that loneliness must be accepted as one of the conditions of human existence. Quest for human happiness is a never-ending search in which man must engage forever. "Eden is not here nor anywhere, but forever must be sought with man's best energies, highest hopes, in all humility and in all humanity."¹³⁴

But by 1857 Melville was convinced that man's best energies led only to self deception, which is the central theme of *The Confidence Man*.

¹²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹³¹*Ibid.*, p. 432.

¹³²Melville, *Moby Dick*, p. 105.

¹³³*Ibid.*, p. 76.

¹³⁴Horsford, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

III

The Confidence Man: The World As Bad Faith

The Confidence Man is a dark book. Like *Mardi* and *Pierre* it ends in total shipwreck. *Moby Dick* also ends in wreck, but there is something beyond—Ahab's destruction is balanced by Ishmael's salvation. Ishmael's increasing sense of humanity suggests that even if all religious props fail, man can at least exist by the rule of his own honesty, integrity, and commitment to the brotherhood of man. Thus, *Moby Dick* does emanate a hope, however faint and flickering it may be, that meaningless and absurdity of existence can be transcended by man's faith and confidence in man. But in *The Confidence Man* so intense seem to be Melville's bitter despair and passionate unbelief, stemming from the limitations of reason and religion, that he snatches away the very props he had created for human existence in *Moby Dick*. And yet, from the viewpoint of inner awareness, *The Confidence Man* marks the logical continuation and culmination of the despairing mood set by Ishmael—Melville's brooding on "linked analogies" in *Moby Dick*. As Ishmael, the more Melville meditated on the "argument from design" the more he was convinced of divine irresponsibility. If God is the creator of this imperfect world, then he is responsible for the way it is and what happens in it. Human reason can do little to introduce motives of hope, harmony, and unity in this fractured world where the only certainty is that nothing is certain, nothing is knowable, nothing is what it appears to be; hence nothing can be believed and trusted. With supreme irony shot with malicious humor, Melville makes us aware of the impotence of religion to solve the eternal paradoxes and ambiguities of human existence. The novel swings between two extreme ethical viewpoints: the worldly wisdom in "No Trust" (*The Book of Proverbs*) and unworldly faith in "charity" (*The Corinthians*). With pitiless clarity he clashes these two ethics against each other from which his characters must choose in the dark, without knowing what they are choosing, without knowing what they are rejecting, for the whole of human existence is but a metaphysical ambiguity. The theme of ambiguity seems to have weighed so much on Melville's mind that *The Confidence Man* is built on one single theme of ambiguity that touches all mankind.

Nietzsche's despair, arising from the denial of Christian morality and truth, is triumphantly expressed by him in one sentence, "Nothing is true, all is permitted."¹³⁵ This sentence also expresses well Melville's cynical despair to which he gave full vent in *The Confidence Man*. In this sense *The Confidence Man* is the symbolic counterpart of Melville's black mood; in it he has logically worked and dramatically presented the ultimate consequences of this shocking statement. In *The Confidence Man* Melville has presented us with an authentic vision of a greedy and godless world in which not only faith on which the Church is built is

¹³⁵Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche and Christianity*, trans., E. B. Ashton, p. 83.

equivocal, but equally ambiguous is the entire order of the universe. In such an ambiguous world there are no more friends but only accomplices, there are none innocent but all are victims and persecutors. The theme, structure, and style are all geared together to prove the systematized disorder of the universe, in which all notions of good and evil are ambiguously inverted, and since nothing is true, everything is permitted. In *The Confidence Man* Melville casts himself in the role of a director of a grim and farcical tragedy, and, like Hamlet, sets up "mouse traps" to "catch the conscience" of his victims. In this grim and gloomy world every character wears a mask and everyone is betrayed by everyone. The whole novel is like the performance of a surgical operation aimed at tearing away the masks of security and complacency. It symbolizes the hell of bad faith, for implicit faith in charity is as pernicious as its opposite.

The Confidence Man reveals Melville's economy of technique and mastery of a style that has closer affinities with drama than with the novel, particularly with the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd. It is interesting to note that *The Confidence Man* has all the characteristics of the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd. Melville's theories of fiction writing and the illustration of his theories in *The Confidence Man* all foreshadow the theoretical assumptions and techniques followed by the Theatre of the Absurd.

The Theatre of the Absurd, as Esslin points out, is essentially satirical and parodistic in nature. Many of its plays, like almost all the novels of Melville, are circular in structure—they end exactly where they began, proving Beckett's intuition that ". . . *nothing really ever happens* in man's existence."¹³⁶ The Theatre of the Absurd lacks plot and characters in the conventional sense, because it tackles its subject matter where neither characters nor plot exist. Characters presuppose that human nature is fixed, and that diversity and individuality of personality are real and matter; plot can exist only on the assumption that events in time are significant. These precisely are the assumptions Melville has implicitly refuted in *The Confidence Man*. In the plays of Beckett, Ionesco and Adamov, there are no characters but embodiments of basic human attitudes like the personified virtues and vices of medieval mystery plays. What passes in these plays are not events with a beginning and a definite end but types of situations that will forever repeat themselves. Through these series of "instants," or situations, the endeavour of the dramatist is to communicate a truer picture of reality itself, which is both complex and contradictory at the same time.¹³⁷

In *The Confidence Man*, Melville has abandoned all the conventional techniques of fiction writing. There is no attempt at narrating a story with a central character with whom the reader can emotionally identify himself—feel, experience, and see the world through his eyes, or even be sure that the particular character represents the author's point of view.

¹³⁶Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 294.

¹³⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 294-295.

Instead of a revealing consciousness like Ishmael's, we have a nameless and anonymous consciousness that merely records facts but does not comment on them. At times when this nameless voice does comment, it completely reverses the entire order of things, and, thus, arouses a feeling of discrepancy and discord. The traditional techniques of fiction writing implicitly requires an accepted scale of values by which persons, events, and the protagonist himself are brought to judgement. But in a novel of the absurd like *The Confidence Man*, with metaphysical nothingness as its basic theme, there can be no set of absolute norms or values; such a novel by force requires a tightening of structure to save it from drifting away into triviality. Precisely for this reason *The Confidence Man* is very tight in structure. Instead of a linear plot, leading to a climax, there are a series of situations or "mousetraps"; instead of one or two protagonists, there are a number of shady characters described objectively and with extreme brevity, who are out to cheat their fellow passengers; but who, at times, wittingly or unwittingly fall into these traps. These traps are so cunningly set up by Melville that both the victims and the victimizers stand mercilessly exposed. Action in *The Confidence Man* is replaced by short, terse, elliptical and trenchant talk, and emotion by pitiless wit. The whole novel is composed of a series of situations, interwoven together like the themes in a musical composition, flashed on the reader's mind like images in a magic lantern that create an impression of complexity and diversity in a basic, static situation. Like "a carrousel the novel whirls in its own circle while remaining in the same place."¹³⁸ Tension is underscored by the confrontations between the confidence men and their victims. But neither the innocents nor their victims, who fall prey to human weaknesses, get the least sympathy from their creator, who remains supreme in his godlike indifference, for in a greedy and godless world no one is innocent and everything is permitted. In *The Confidence Man* Melville seems to refute Ivan Karamazov who said, "All I know is that there is much suffering and that none are guilty."¹³⁹ Melville seems to assert, with a malicious chuckle, that no one is innocent, all are guilty, and all must suffer. Even his most sympathetic readers are shocked by Melville's pugnacious black humor, a tool with which he tortures his own creatures and derives a sort of masochistic pleasure in doing so. The total effect of the novel is as shocking and horrifying as Camus' *Caligula*.

In *The Confidence Man*, Melville adheres strictly to the unities of time, place, and action; the voyage of the *Fidèle*, the microcosm of the world, begins at daybreak on All Fools' Day and ends at midnight. The incarnations of the Confidence Man give the novel its fundamental design in structure, but the theme is developed through the responses of the secondary characters who fall victims to his machinations. At once, the theme and form become an invisible unit; the parts are tightly held together by the all-pervading theme. The novel is divided into two parts of equal length. In the first part (Chapters 1-22) the confidence man

¹³⁸Hennig Cohen, ed., Herman Melville, *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade*, p. x.

comes in his seven incarnations. In the second part (Chapters 23-45) he comes in his final form as the Cosmopolitan. The first part takes place in daylight and the second at night. The recurrence of the drinking bouts further tightens the structure.

As soon as the riverboat *Fidele*, the "ship of fools," departs for New Orleans, "a man in cream colors" comes aboard. He is the first incarnation of the confidence men who are to succeed him during this voyage. All these confidence men partake in varying degrees the characteristics of those beings against whom man has been warned in the "Book of Proverbs" in the *Bible*.¹⁴⁰ These confidence men, with their uncanny behaviour, their curious costumes, their smooth and slippery language, and their strange arrivals and departures, are quite distinct from one another. Yet they have much in common. As a matter of fact, the reader feels that these roles are played by the same actor who is ". . . quite an original genius in his vocation,"¹⁴¹ a ". . . sort of a devil with many masks."¹⁴² The earlier confidence men merely played upon the sympathies of the people and were interested in grabbing pennies, the later are involved in playing a much subtler game. They are not robbing their victims of tangibles but intangibles—faith and confidence.¹⁴³

The "man with cream-colors" and "flaxen hair" arrives without baggage but seems to have ". . . come from a very long distance."¹⁴⁴ He writes his messages of hope, faith, and charity, which he holds aloft: falls asleep in "lamb like innocence" at the foot of the ladder, and departs unnoticed. He is deaf and mute and "teacheth with his fingers." But so uncanny is his silence that it raises conflicting opinions about his origins and nature that intensify the mystery of his significance. His messages of "charity" are juxtaposed with the barber's sign of "No Trust" and, thus, Melville casually introduces the central theme of the novel. These conflicting signs also symbolize the basic human attitudes of his secondary characters, whose responses determine the meaning of the novel.

The second incarnation of the Confidence Man is in the shape of a "grotesque Negro cripple," Black Guinea, who shuffles about like a performing dog, catching pennies in his mouth, seeking charity and trust. When accused of playing fraudulently upon the sympathies of the public, he gives a list of names of the "honest g'emen" aboard who will vouch for him. None of them can be found, but they later appear as incarnations of the Confidence Man. Black Guinea's most virulent opponent is the man with the "wooden leg," who warns the public that ". . . Charity is one thing and truth another, . . . looks are one thing and facts another."¹⁴⁵ Though he does not fall prey to the Negro cripple's masquer-

¹³⁸Maurice Natanson, *Literature, Philosophy and Social Sciences*, p. 128.

¹⁴⁰*The Holy Bible*, "The Book of Proverbs," Chapters 18-20.

¹⁴¹Herman Melville, *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade*, p. 11.

¹⁴²John Shroeder, "The Sources and Symbols for Melville's *Confidence Man*," *PMLA* (June, 1951), p. 368.

¹⁴³John G. Cawelti, "Some Notes on the Structure of *The Confidence Man*," *American Literature* (November, 1957), p. 283.

¹⁴⁴Melville, *The Confidence Man*, p. 15.

¹⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 23.

ade, yet he is a victim of his own " . . . one-sided view of humanity,"¹⁴⁶ a symbol of universal malcontent. The Negro cripple, at last, . . . forlornly stumped out of sight¹⁴⁷ toward some unknown destination.

The appearance of the garrulous and "grotesque Negro cripple" immediately after the deaf and mute "man with cream colors" with "flaxen hair" is dramatically very effective in terms of physical and color contrasts. Apparently, both seem harmless, but both symbolize evil in terms of color imagery, as we know from Melville's digression on the "whiteness" of the white whale in *Moby Dick* and the use of black and white colors to suggest evil in "Benito Cerano."

The third Confidence Man is John Ringman, whom Black Guinea had called "dat man wid de weed." He wears a weed to show he is in mourning. His appeal for money is effective with Henry Roberts, a kind, elderly merchant, but he is unable to win the confidence of the young collegian. Before he leaves he tells the merchant about a quick profit to be made through buying the shares of Black Rapids Coal Company, whose president, as well as transfer agent, is aboard.

The next Confidence Man is the agent for a "Widow and Orphan Asylum founded among the Seminoles."¹⁴⁸ He is able to obtain donations from an Episcopal clergyman, a charitable lady, and a good-hearted gentleman with gold sleeve-buttons, notable for his immaculate clothing and spotless hands, for whom " . . . charity was not an effort, but a luxury."¹⁴⁹ The good gentleman with "gold sleeve-buttons" listens attentively to the Seminole agent's plan for "World Charity" to be operated in the "Wall Street spirit,"¹⁵⁰ and of this philanthropic agency "I have nominated myself provisional treasurer . . . to receive subscriptions."¹⁵¹ The agent also informs him about his invention of a "Protean easy-chair" which would "somehow" ease the "most tormented conscience."¹⁵²

In this episode (which is repeated once again with slight variations), Melville has so cunningly set up the trap that the confidence man and his patient listener, the "winsome man with gold sleeve-buttons," a "good man" by "Pauline standards," seem both to stand on the same dialectic. The Seminole Agent's militant plans of world charity operated in a Wall Street financier's manner, to eradicate poverty and to Christianize the "Chinese en masse" with a " . . . body of ten thousand missionaries,"¹⁵³ makes charity as terrifying a project as a mad dictator's scheme of conquering the world by force. This "good man" is exposed as a slave owner who kept his own hands spotlessly clean by making his "Negro body-servant whose hands nature had dyed black"¹⁵⁴ do all the work for him. But such a man, Melville affirms, is capable of sinning

¹⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁴⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 40.

¹⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁵¹*Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹⁵²*Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁵³*Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 49.

through his deputy, and, with bitter sarcasm, he compares this man " . . . whose very good luck it was to be a very good man"¹⁵⁵ to the "Hebrew governor" (Pontius Pilate) who kept his own hands clean by sinning through his "deputy" (the high priest of Jewish rabbis). Ironically, this meeting between the winsome good man and the Seminole agent is described as " . . . good man's reception of the . . . righteous man."¹⁵⁶

John Truman, president and transfer agent of Black Rapids Coal Company, is the fifth shape of the Confidence Man. A "ruby cheeked man in a tasselled-cap," carrying under his arm a "ledger-like volume,"¹⁵⁷ he sells stocks to the Collegian and offers him an opportunity to invest in a real estate development scheme called New Jerusalem. He also sells stocks to Roberts, the kindly merchant. But his chief achievement is in embezzling a hundred dollars from a "senile old miser" whose greed for a quick profit overpowers his reason. All these three men are victims of their own greed.

A jovial quack dressed in a " . . . snuff colored surtout"¹⁵⁸ is the sixth shape of the Confidence Man. He is a herb doctor and a bone setter, who wanders around hawking his nature cures and extolling the virtues of Nature, particularly natural medical remedies, the "Omni Balsamic Reinvigorator" and the "Samaritan Pain Dissuader." Capitalizing on the miseries and vain hopes of men, he is able to sell his natural remedies to an "incurably sick, senile old miser" (from whom John Truman had bilked a hundred dollars), who pays him in clipped coins which the herb doctor notices but does not mind. He is also able to palm off his cure-alls to a crippled "soldier of fortune" whose confession reveals him as something of an imposter himself. But the herb doctor is not able to fool the "invalid Titan in homespun" accompanied by a little girl who seemed to be "a little Cassandra." As a matter of fact, the herb doctor's false panegyrics on nature so much infuriate the "invalid Titan" that he gives him (the herb doctor) a " . . . sudden side blow" and cries out, "Profane fiddler on heart strings. Snake!"¹⁵⁹ But the injured herb doctor remains patient and continues his pathetic appeals in the midst of a frigid company. Neither is he able to fool Pitch, a Missouri backwoodsman, whose long and rough associations with Nature had given him an ample cause to doubt all natural remedies. The Missourian rightly identifies the herb doctor as a "fox," a "dubious man."¹⁶⁰ But, meanwhile, the herb doctor finds out that Pitch is intent on buying a machine to replace human labor. As the riverboat approaches Cape Girardeau, he bids Pitch well, and disappears.

As soon as the river boat is under way, Pitch is accosted by a " . . . round backed, baker-kneed man, in a mean five-dollar suit,"¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁵*Lcc. cit.*

¹⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹⁵⁹*Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹⁶⁰*Ibid.*, p. 135.

¹⁶¹*Ibid.*, p. 137.

wearing a chain with a small brass plate with the letters P. I. O. engraved on it. He is the Confidence Man in his seventh incarnation. The initials stand for Philosophical Intelligence Office, an employment agency conducted on the philosophical scientific principles, of which he is an agent. Pitch, who is on his way to buy a labour saving machine to replace his rascally boys, cannot resist the arguments, based on scientific rationalism, for trusting human nature. He is persuaded to try one more boy sent from this agency. Reluctantly, he hands over to the agent the passage money for the boy, but immediately feels uneasy about this deal. Skeptical as he may be, Pitch is still swindled out of a few coppers by the smooth and slippery arguments of the P. I. O. agent. Pitch, in spite of all his crusty skepticism, is not at heart as distrustful of human nature as Mark Winsome, the mystic, whose cold and icy insight into human nature saves him from being vulnerable to such human weaknesses.

At dusk while Pitch was beginning to recover his senses from a “. . . dose of chloroform treacherously given” by the “. . . flunky beast that windeth his way on his belly” and meditating on how the fallacious analogies had “. . . betrayed him into being an unphilosophical dupe.”¹⁶² He was suddenly roused from his reveries by Frank Goodman, a self-proclaimed Cosmopolitan. He is the Confidence Man in his final form. The stranger sported a vesture of various hues—an “Emir’s robe,” a “French blouse,” white trousers of duck,” maroon slippers—and “a jaunty smoking-cap of regal purple—smoking a Nuremberg pipe.”¹⁶³ His talk, befitting his title, is sprinkled with foreign phrases. Pitch identifies him as a man-hater posing as man-lover, a “Diogenes in disguise,”¹⁶⁴ and waves him away. The Cosmopolitan then meets Charles Nobles, a Mississippi operator, whose attempts to fool the Cosmopolitan end in his own confusion. The Cosmopolitan is identified by Mark Winsome, a transcendentalist philosopher, as a “snake.” The philosopher is protected by his own aloofness from human considerations, and so is his practical and logical disciple, Egbert. But the Cosmopolitan, with the gift of his gab, is successful in cheating the barber, William Cream, out of a shave’s payment. But the barber is soon restored to his senses and identifies the Cosmopolitan as a “snake charmer.” At midnight the Cosmopolitan approaches a “. . . clean, comely old man, his head snowy as a marble and countenance . . . ascribed to good Simeon,” reading his Bible, “. . . untainted by the world because ignorant of it.”¹⁶⁵ The tired old man is persuaded by a “juvenile peddler” with “leopard like teeth”¹⁶⁶ to buy a lock and a money belt and receives a Counterfeit Detector in the bargain, which only increases his confusion. Tired and bewildered, he turns to the Cosmopolitan for assistance to guide him to his stateroom but not without a “Life Preserver.” Like a sister of charity, the Cosmopolitan immediately rushes to the old man’s call for help. He puts out the reading lamp and “kindly” leads the old man into darkness.

¹⁶²*Ibid.*, pp. 156-157.

¹⁶³*Ibid.*, p. 158.

¹⁶⁴*Ibid.*, p. 166.

¹⁶⁵*Ibid.*, p. 280.

¹⁶⁶*Ibid.*, p. 285.

The last symbolic act of the *Cosmopolitan* is so terrifyingly ambiguous that no matter how carefully we interpret his past actions, the heart of mystery is past finding. The *Cosmopolitan*, unlike his predecessors, is not a purveyor of false stocks, the dispenser of false cure-alls, the collector of charities for hoax institutions, but a seeker of friendship. Instead of succeeding as in the past, he is rebuffed with distrust, suspicion, indifference, and hostility. In the drinking scene with Charlie Nobles, the Mississippi operator, it appears that Charlie is playing the confidence game rather than the *Cosmopolitan*. In his conversation with the icy-cold mystic and his practical and shrewd disciple, the *Cosmopolitan*, by comparison, appears to be far more humane in his ideas and human in his sympathy for man. Only in the barber scene, he is held up to his tricks, bilking the barber out of the price of a shave. But whether he would "kindly" lead the "old man" to his cabin, or rob and murder him in darkness—neither of these two possibilities can be positively affirmed. So enigmatic is the whole action as well as ". . . incomplete reversals"¹⁶⁷ of characters that the reader, no matter how carefully he reads the novel, is unable to find a clue to the mystery.

But one thing is certain: Melville has used the *Cosmopolitan* as a catalytic agent for exposing the "moral imbalance"¹⁶⁸ of the high principled ones like Emerson and Thoreau. He has so cunningly set up the "mouse trap" that both transcendentalists, though they do not fall victims to the *Cosmopolitan*, fall prey to the Arch Confidence Man—Melville, who mercilessly reveals the shallowness of their philosophical idealism.

The episode of Mark Winsome and his disciple, Egbert, is the longest one in the novel, and six chapters are devoted to it. The mystic appears with no warning and has very little connection with the plot of the novel. Unlike other characters, the mystic is described in greater detail; he is a subtle combination of shrewd, self-protecting mistrust and misty mythicalness, a ". . . kind of cross between a Yankee peddler and a Tartar priest."¹⁶⁹ Melville has emphatically associated the ideas of "cooly" and "chill" with Emerson, who seemed more like a ". . . metaphysical merman than a feeling man."¹⁷⁰ The conversation between the mystic and the *Cosmopolitan* is focused around some of Emerson's pivotal ideas in *Nature*.¹⁷¹ While the conversation on "rattle-snakes" continues, the mystic shrewdly observes, ". . . whoever is destroyed by a rattle-snake or other harmful agent, it is his own fault" and asks, "Who will pity the charmer that is bitten with a serpent." The *Cosmopolitan* bluntly replies, "I would pity him."¹⁷² Here, Melville gets an opportunity to emphasize the coldness of Emerson's abstract idealism. Suddenly, a haggard looking man approaches the mystic, begging for

¹⁶⁷Cavelti, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

¹⁶⁸Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. xiv.

¹⁶⁹Melville, *The Confidence Man*, p. 221.

¹⁷⁰*Ibid.*, p. 223.

¹⁷¹Egbert S. Oliver, "Melville's Picture of Emerson and Thoreau in *The Confidence Man*," *College English* VIII, 1946, p. 65.

¹⁷²Melville, *The Confidence Man*, p. 223.

alms; the mystic's response is unexpectedly unsympathetic. The Cosmopolitan gives the beggar a shilling, but the mystic ". . . more like a cold prism than ever."¹⁷³ All the high-flown idealism of the mystic turns into vapor when confronted with the human situation.

But Melville does not stop at this, he extends his satire on the transcendentalists to the mystic's disciple, Egbert, who is explicitly based on Henry David Thoreau.¹⁷⁴ Egbert is introduced to the Cosmopolitan as ". . . first among mankind to reduce to practice the principles of Mark Winsome—principles previously accounted as less adapted to life than the closet."¹⁷⁵ The heartlessness of the disciple is brought out by their discussion on friendship. The two men act out an imaginary episode. The Cosmopolitan, calling himself Frank, addresses the disciple as Charlie and requests a loan of money. The disciple carries the arguments for refusal to such ridiculous lengths that the loan of money becomes an object of satire on the *Week* which Melville uses as a basis for his caricature of transcendental friendship.¹⁷⁶ The Cosmopolitan is shocked by this ". . . moonshiny . . . yet a very practical philosophy in effect," and, as a parting shot, flings a "shilling" at Egbert to ". . . buy a few chips to warm the frozen nature of you and your philosopher by."¹⁷⁷

The Confidence Man knows his men: ". . . that good dish man still delights me,"¹⁷⁸ and he tells Pitch whether he prefers fools of vice to fools of virtue is difficult to determine. The virtuous and the vicious are not only his victims but, also in a more subtle way, he forces the well disposed ones to expose themselves. The mystical Mark Winsome, through his insight into human nature and mistrust for man, intuitively identifies the Cosmopolitan as a confidence man. Like "winsome" good man with "gold sleeve-buttons," he transcends his human problem through his practical disciple, but, at the same time, reveals the shallowness of his idealism. Egbert, the worldly-wise, shrewd man, also like his master, mistrusts the Cosmopolitan, but he is as much a victim to his one-sided view of humanity as the "man with a wooden leg" and William Cream, the barber with the sign "No Trust." Similarly, the militant Methodist preacher also reveals his moral imbalance when he tries to teach the one-legged man by shaking him like a nine-pin, as does the "invalid Titan in homespun" who in rage gives a vicious blow to the herb doctor. Almost all the characters reveal their moral imbalance except the Episcopal clergyman, the charitable lady, and the old man, who are victims of innocence, not of ignorance in a Melvillean universe. The Indian Hater and China Aster are both victims of their extreme view of humanity. The Collegian, the elderly merchant, and the miserly old senile man are victims of their own greed and selfishness. No matter whether a man falls a victim to his own greed or ignorance, or falls prey

¹⁷³*Ibid.*, p. 228.

¹⁷⁴Oliver, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

¹⁷⁵Melville, *The Confidence Man*, p. 231.

¹⁷⁶Oliver, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

¹⁷⁷Melville, *op. cit.*, p. 261

¹⁷⁸*Ibid.*, p. 160.

to the guiles of the Confidence Man, or exposes his moral imbalance when caught in the "mousetrap," all seem to sail in the same boat. With supreme irony, Melville makes every man a confidence man and life a confidence game played with an arbitrary set of rules changed by everyone at will, without notice, which makes everyone a transgressor, everyone guilty. In this guilt-ridden world where there is no truth, everything is permitted. Such is the grim, gloomy and terrifying world view of *The Confidence Man*.

What Melville seems to assert is that in an ambiguous and paradoxical world, where it is impossible to know why it was created, what part man has been assigned in it, what constitutes a right action, and how can it be distinguished from the wrong one, it is foolhardy to make any positive statement. All religious and philosophical systems that claim to know and seek to explain the inscrutable mystery of the universe are inadequate and will forever remain inadequate means to know the "thing-in-itself."

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