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Religious implications in the fiction of Herman Melville

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RELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS IN THE FICTION OF HERMAN MELVILLE

A THESIS

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BY

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# Table of Contents

**Preface**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>HERMAN HELVILLE AND HIS RELIGIOUS PROCLIVITY</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>EXEMPLIFICATIONS OF RELIGIOUS ELEMENTS IN HIS MAJOR FICTION</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>EFFECTIVENESS OF HELVILLE'S USE OF RELIGIOUS ELEMENTS IN HIS FICTION</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bibilography</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After talking extensively with his friend at the sand dunes near Southport, Massachusetts, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote in his journal the following statement concerning Herman Melville:

He had pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated. But still he does not rest in that anticipation, and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists -- and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before that -- in wandering to-and-fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. If he were a religious man, he would be one of the most truly religious and reverential. He had a very high and noble nature, and better worth immortality than most of us.  

Coming from the friend with whom he had talked most intimately about such matters, this expression of wonder at Melville's obsession with religious problems is a classic statement of Melville's spiritual condition during the latter half of his life. In earlier years he had expressed no doubt about the reality of the Deity. In the novel Mardi he says emphatically through Babbalanja that "God is my Lord, and though many satellites revolve around me, I and all mine revolve round the great central truth, fixed and luminous forever in the foundationless firmament."  

Herman Melville did not issue a formal statement of his religious belief to anyone. Did he believe in God? Had not he inherited a profound religious faith? What then is the essential factor responsible for the disquieting of his early affirmation of faith? This nineteenth century writer has much to say about these questions in his major fiction. The writer proposes, therefore, to make an

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1William Braswell, Melville's Religious Thought (Durham, North Carolina, 1943), p. 3.  
2Ibid.  
3Herman Melville, Mardi (New York, 1849), p. 577.  

All subsequent references to Melville's writings are entered without the name of the author.
analysis of his major works with specific reference to his great obsession with the questions of good and evil and to explore what he has to say about the nature of God and His relationship to man. An attempt will be made to reveal the enormous extent to which Melville makes use of religious elements in his novels. Further, the question of why he is so concerned with the problem of religion, good and evil will be explored. Lastly, an effort will be made to formulate the resulting effectiveness of Melville as an author of American fiction because of his employment of the Bible and other religious elements.

This study will include selected prose fiction which has special reference to the central problem in this study. Specifically, the works to be analyzed are *Typee* (1846), *Omoo* (1847), *Mardi* (1849), *Redburn* (1849), *White Jacket* (1850), *Pierre* (1852), *Moby Dick* (1851), *The Confidence Man* (1857), *Bartleby the Scrivner* (1853), *Benito Cereno* (1855), and *Billy Budd* (1891).

The writer finds it necessary to make use of Melville's unusual travel experiences and other vitally pertinent biographical information in order to effectively display the religious implications in his fiction.

The writer wishes to acknowledge at this point her indebtedness to all persons who assisted her while she pursued this study. She extends her warmest expressions of thanks to the librarians of Atlanta University and the city of Brunswick, who made available the research materials needed for this study; to Mrs. T. D. Curl and Mrs. L. D. Graves, formerly of the Department of English at Morris Brown College, who encouraged and motivated the writer as she undertook graduate study; and most of all to Dr. Thomas D. Jarrett, Dean of the Graduate School, Atlanta University, who is directly responsible for the motivation the writer received for this research, and to whom the writer expresses appreciation for his conscientious advice and instruction in the technique of research.

This study is dedicated to my husband, Sidney A. Watkins, my children - Bronwyn Allencia and Richard Gerald Watkins, my uncle, Richard H. Perry, and to my mother, Margaret A. Perry, who kept saying, "You can do it."
CHAPTER I

HERMAN MELVILLE AND HIS RELIGIOUS PROCLIVITY

The case of Herman Melville is certainly one of the strangest and most pathetic in the nineteenth century. Most American authors found happy answers to their questions regarding the new skepticism of their era. However, our "whaling writer" was different. He had a very definite reason for his obsession with religious thought. That reason was his inherited theological cast of mind and the religious atmosphere in which he was reared. It would have been strange indeed if he had not given a great deal of thought to religious matters.

Sophia Hawthorne became well-acquainted with Melville because of his frequent visits with her husband, Nathaniel Hawthorne. She described him in the following way:

Mr. Melville is a person of great ardor and simplicity; a man with a true, warm heart, and a soul and an intellect, with life to his fingertips; earnest, sincere, and reverent; very tender and modest...a very great man. He is tall and erect, with an air free, brave, and manly and a strange, lazy glance that does not seem to penetrate through you, but to take you into himself.¹

This glowing description could very well apply to any orthodox minister of this era or the one in which Melville lived. But Melville was certainly not one to assume the role of clergy.

Robert E. Spiller stated that "Melville was throughout his life a dual personality; he could live on two levels of consciousness and be fully and keenly alive on both at the same time." ¹ This observation enables one to understand the impression which he made on Mrs. Hawthorne because of his winning personality. D. H. Lawrence says in concluding his essay on Omoo and Typee that "Melville was, at the core, a mystic and an idealist, ... and he stuck to his ideal guns."²

These varied descriptions were inevitably written after much serious consideration of Melville. His personality is greatly reflected in his writings and is a by-product of his religious impulse.

The Calvinistic tradition had been established on both sides of the Melville family generations before Herman was born. His great-great-grandfather Melville had served nearly half a century as a clergyman in a Scotch Kirk, a fact in which the family took pride. Numerous letters show what an ardent Christian his maternal grandmother Gansevoort was and what a deep impression her religion made on her children. His father, Allan Melville, saw in everything the hand of a benevolent but jealous God. To show reverence and humility he always wrote the word God with three capital letters.³ While at sea he wrote to his wife the following account of his reverential attitude:

Indeed if men are ever seriously inclined, or feel their total and immediate dependence on GOD, it must be on an element where His most wonderful power is displayed, and where His omnipotence alone can save from destruction.⁴

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³ Braswell, op. cit., p. 4.
⁴ Ibid., p. 5.
Therefore it does not seem feasible to label Allan Melville as the Blasphemous Captain Ahab, for he was never more worshipful than when at sea.

In addition to teaching their children at home from the book *Treatise on the Education of Daughters* by Fenelon and the long didactic novel *Justina*, the Melvilles took their children regularly to church services to hear the word of God. Before Allan Melville's death in 1832, his son Herman, then in his thirteenth year, had time to learn a great deal about his father's religious views. He was subjected to his mother's influence many more years.

Family prayers were held, and the Sabbath was strictly kept. All frivolous books, sewing, knitting, or any other handiwork, were put away and religious tracts took their places. They had a cold dinner and attended church twice. This is the way in which Melville's daughter recalled the strictness of her paternal grandmother. Even the grade school selected for Herman Melville, the Albany Academy, had the reputation of being a "God-fearing school."

The partially autobiographical novel *Pierre* tells us that Pierre joined the church when he was sixteen. This fact is not ascertained by the records of the church that Melville's mother and sisters became members of in 1837 and 1838. Even if he did not become an official member of the church, he felt its influence. *Pierre* is in essence autobiographically true in recording that Pierre unconsciously accepted the faith of his fathers. According to all evidence, *Redburn* is also autobiographically true in representing its young hero as feeling strange without a church to go to on board ship.

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2 *Ibid*.
3 *Ibid*.
4 *Pierre*, p. 6.
5 *Redburn*, p. 1488.
As to whether or not Melville in later life ever connected with a church, after he had written much about Christianity in his books, his journal of 1849-1850 shows that he went to church on six of the seven Sundays he spent in England. From the 1850's on, however, he seldom went to church.¹ No evidence to show his official church affiliation has been found.

Mrs. Melville, his wife, writes that he would on rare occasions attend her church — "All Souls Church on Fourth Avenue." During the latter part of his life, however, he failed to do even this, but he continued to associate with devout people.² His wife's faith in God is clearly expressed in one of her letters. She wrote that

The ways of Providence are indeed inscrutable and past finding out, but I am one of those who cling to the belief that somehow these mysterious dispensations will seem right to us, and at 'even tide' there shall be light.³

The sturdy, unwavering faith of Melville's family and some of his friends can hardly be overemphasized as an influence on his religious proclivity. Their traditional belief in life after death, their conviction that God controls all for the best, were ever present reminders of his earlier unquestioning faith. His envy of the religious peace enjoyed by those around him made him seek to strengthen what remained of his old faith or find a new faith to serve in the place of the lost one.

There were several liberalizing influences of Melville's thought. The experiences which he gained through his travels as a young man were foremost in unsettling his complacency about orthodox religious teachings. The sights that

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¹Braswell, op. cit., p. 7.
²Ibid.
³Ibid.
he saw on his voyage to Liverpool and in his travels to South Seas did much to
cause his interrogation of the creeds and principles that Christians lived by.
He showed when he wrote Typee and Omoo that what he had seen had convinced him
that some people would have been better off if they had never heard of Jesus
Christ.\(^1\) He had become bitter as he learned a great deal about the incompetence
of missionaries and observed the insincerity of many who professes to guide others
to Christian salvation.\(^2\)

Melville's reading was another factor which contributed heavily to his new
skepticism. The book with which he was longest acquainted and most familiar was
the Bible. His home training early acquainted him with it as revealed truth; and
later he came to appreciate its beauty as literature and its "invaluable lessons
of style," to use a phrase about it that he underlined in Arnold's Essays in
Criticism.\(^3\) In addition to the Bible he read many periodicals, but his favorite
reading was ancient and modern travel literature, which heavily influenced his
fiction.\(^4\) Some of the travel books set out to compare religions and mythologies.
He read widely in the popular sources of mythology, modern periodicals, ancient
and modern poetry, fiction, drama, and travel literature. He also read deeply
in the central documents of post Renaissance mythology — the ponderous polemical
tomes of learned heretics and divines. He used as sources an English translation

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 8.
\(^2\)Ibid.
\(^3\)Ibid.
\(^4\)H. Bruce Franklin, The Wake of the Gods (Stanford, California, 1963),
p. 6.
of Bayle's *Dictionnaire* and Thomas Maurice's *Indian Antiquities*. Melville knew well and used carefully the theories of Maurice and his nineteenth century followers — that pagan myths were merely Revelation spread by man's travels and distorted by man's mind — and those of Bayle and his eighteenth century followers — that all man's myths and gods were merely products of man's mind.  

Melville used the language, theories, knowledge, and techniques of both the Cheirtian and the skeptical mythologists to explore the relations between man and his gods. He perused the writings of major Christian dogmatists from Augustine to Calvin and the more famous saints, Jewish history, Rabbinical and medieval religious lore, seventeenth century sermons and metaphysical essays, Dante, Milton, Shakespeare, and the works of the stoics and deists.

Melville himself said in a letter to his friend Duncyink upon his discovery of Shakespeare in his twenty-ninth year,

> Ah, he's full of sermons-on-the-mount, and gentle, aye, almost as Jesus. I take such men to be inspired. I fancy that this Mount Shakespeare in heaven ranks with Gabriel, Raphael, and Michael. And if another Messiah ever comes t'will be in Shakespeare's person.

Mrs. Wright says Shakespeare and the Bible are the two major influences on all of his writings.

The extensive reading program which Melville chose for himself was his formal literary education. However, his compelling force for such a bland reading

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6 Wright, op. cit., p. 6.
diet was an insatiated curiosity which stimulated his motivation for the long
search to phathom the unfathomable with the limited comprehension of man. Thus
was the beginning of Melville's attempt to forget the undiluted Calvinistic dogma
of innate depravity, predestination, and thorough submissiveness to God as reveal-
ed through Jesus Christ. His reading helped him to solve problems in his mind
and also gave rise to new problems.

When Melville read in his New Testament St. Paul's counsel to the Romans,
"Hast thou faith? Have it to thyself before God," he annotated, "The only kind
of faith — one's own." And he believed that the strongest faith is one that
has been stripped of all superfluities. He made a not uncommon defense of skepti-
cism in the chapter on "Faith and Knowledge" in Mardi (1849) when he wrote, "The
higher the intelligence, the more faith, and the less credulity; Gabriel rejects
more than we, but out-believes us all."  

The question that challenged the profundity of his reasoning concerned the
nature of God. He said little in Typee and Omoo about it, but Mardi plainly shows
how this subject perplexed him. The general tone of Mardi makes one feel that
Babbalanja speaks for Melville when he asserts that

...atheists there are none. For in things abstract, men but differ
in the sounds that come from their mouths, and not in the wordless
thoughts lying at the bottom of their beings.

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1 Lawrence R. Thompson, Melville's Quarrel with God (Princeton, New Jersey,
1952), p. 4.  
3 Mardi, p. 540.  
5 Ibid.
Although there is no doubt about Melville's Theism, it is not so easy to say just what he believed in regard to the nature of the Deity. He thought argument over the trinitarian conception of God rather foolish, since one might be divided into any number of parts.¹

During and just after writing *Moby Dick*, Melville wrote Hawthorne about his having temporary pantheistic feelings.² But in spite of such moments he was not pantheistic in the Spinozistic sense. While he thought of the universe as animated by the Spirit of God, he looked upon God as transcendent also.³ To him the universe is a "Judea," with a timeless, ubiquitous, omnipotent God as "its head."⁴

In *Mardi* the poet Yoomy says that God champions the right among men, but the philosopher Babbalanja argues that the Deity is often indifferent as to whether right or wrong prevails among men.⁵ Melville points to the heavenly constellations as declaring the glory of God, but he does not forget the shark: "As well hate a seraph as a shark. Both were made by the same hand."⁶ Here one notes that he had begun to worry why a benevolent Deity permits evil. He could not happily resolve the problem as some of his contemporaries did. His belief at this time in the infinite power of God and awareness of evil are responsible for the mournful query as to how God can "witness all this woe, and give no sign."⁷ The questioning of God's

¹ Ibd.
² Ibd.
³ Ibd.
⁴ Ibd.
⁵ Mardi, p. 442.
⁶ Ibd., p. 400.
⁷ Ibd., p. 441.
justice to man reaches a climax when Babbalanja asks an angel in a vision, "Why create the germs that sin and suffer, but to perish?" The angel answers that this makes of God "the everlasting mystery He is ... " Melville's distress over the evil in the world can hardly be overemphasized as an influence on his reasoning about the Deity. 1

Melville's mind was also plagued with the problem of man's divinity. One of the bases of his democratic beliefs was the idea that all men are "sprung from one head, and that all are made in one image." 2 In Moby Dick he reached rhetorical heights in proclaiming

...that democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God; himself! The great God absolute! The centre and circumference of all democracy! His omnipresence our divine equality! 3

And he said in a rhapsodic letter to Hawthorne, "I feel that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the Supper and that we are the pieces. Hence this infinite fraternity of feeling." 4 Poignant queries of characters in Mardi -- "Have we angelic spirits? Are we angels, or dogs?" -- suggest a certain amount of perplexity on the part of the author himself. 5

Melville's Christian training was of course the most important influence on his thought about the divinity of man. The marking of his New Testament and Psalms shows his interest in scriptural testimony on the subject. 6 He marked the verse in which Christ tells the multitude, "And call no man your father upon the

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1 Braswell, op. cit., p. 25.
3 Moby Dick, p. 144.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
earth: for one is your father, which is in heaven," and the verse in which Christ tells the disciples: "...it is not ye that speak, but the spirit of your Father which speaketh in you." He marked the psalmist's praise of God for making man but "a little lower than the angels."¹

An annotation of these verses refers to a flyleaf at the end of the volume. There in Melville's own handwriting is the following inscription:

If we can conceive it possible that the creator of the world himself assumed the form of his creature, and lived in that manner for a time upon earth, this creature must seem to us of infinite perfection, because susceptible of such a combination with his maker. Hence, in our idea of man there can be no inconsistency with our idea of God; and if we often feel a certain disagreement with Him and remoteness from Him, it is but the more on that account our duty, not like advocates of the wicked Spirit, to keep our eyes continually on the nakedness and wickedness of our nature, but rather to seek out every property and beauty, by which our pretension to a similarity with the Divinity may be made good.²

Melville's writing this passage in his New Testament and Psalms emphasizes his fascination with the question of man's divinity, and shows his appreciation of a religious attitude that would develop the best in man. According to the evidence as a whole, Melville believed that all men are possessed of a spark of divinity, but their sad condition troubled him; and he was greatly disturbed by the fact that there is no way of knowing this side of death whether, in the Christian sense, men are truly the children of God.³

Fourth in order of composition, Redburn is the first of his writings to give free expression to that circumstantial sense of human character which was soon to become habitual and preoccupying with him — the sense that the moral pattern within which any man's character mysteriously enacts its life is essentially contingent rather than connate or self-made, and its aspects and direction are determined simply

¹Ibid., p. 27.
²Ibid., p. 27.
³Ibid., p. 28.
by the successive accidents of this or that life history.¹

Man's immortality was another of the subjects that Melville thought of most frequently. He eventually condemned the Calvinistic doctrines on immortality taught him in childhood. Though he made more or less conventional references to hell, he thought the myth of fiery persecution a "horrible fable." And as for heaven, he said in Mardi, "Not one of Cro's priests telleth a straight story concerning it; 'twill be hard finding their paradises."² He was amused at the idea of the resurrection of the body.³ He exclaimed, "Adam and Eve! May it be no part of your immortality to look down upon the world ye have left, for the sight of it would be a parental torment indeed..."⁴

A further obsession of Melville's was for personal frankness, and correspondingly, with the necessity of silence. The conviction rose in him (1849) that behind the deepest utterance of the sincerest of writers there were unspoken secrets of understanding, in which the real mysteries of existence remained locked up. He wrote Duyckinck in March, 1849, that "Even Shakespeare was not a frank man to the uttermost. And, indeed, who in this intolerant universe is, or can be?"⁵

He suggested to Hawthorne the possibility that "...God himself cannot explain His own secrets. Perhaps, after all, there is no secret. Yet all that makes us think there is remains and must be spoken."⁶ He decided that he would follow Hawthorne and stand with him as one in the "chain of God's posts round the world"

¹ Berthoff, op. cit., p. 33.
² Mardi, p. 508.
³ Braswell, op. cit., p. 28.
⁴ Berthoff, op. cit., p. 34.
⁵ Ibid., p. 39.
⁶ Ibid.
in the attempt to render "the tragicalness of human thought in its own unbiased, native, and profounder workings."¹

Sophia Hawthorne said that Melville's conversation was the more unsettling for being so inadvertently confiding. She noted that

...His fresh, sincere, glowing mind...is in a state of 'fluid consciousness,' and to Mr. Hawthorne speaks his innermost about God, the Devil, and Life if so he he can get at the Truth for he is a boy in opinion — having settled nothing yet — ...and it would betray him to make public his confessions and efforts to grasp, — because they would perhaps be considered impious, if one did not take in the whole scope of the case.²

Thus in everyday life he continuously tried to scrutinize the unscrutable in his conversations just as he did in his writings.

In the fall of 1849, when Melville made a voyage to England and the Continent, he kept a journal which discloses something of the complexity of his religious attitude at that time. Though he thought that money spent for the erection of costly churches might have been used more wisely for charity, he admired church architecture, and while abroad he visited many cathedrals and chapels. But it was more than an interest in architecture that made him attend church services. On only one of the seven Sundays he was in Europe did he fail to join some congregation for worship, and sometimes he went to morning and evening services.³ The total impression of his remarks on visiting cathedrals and attending services is that he had a vital interest in the Christian religion.⁴

Melville's life after 1852 was of course not so happy as it had been in the 1840's when he had written vigorously and had led an active social life. Several factors made his life less happy. For one thing, his health was now not so robust

¹Ibid., p. 24.
²Ibid., p. 24.
³Ibid., p. 52.
⁴Ibid., p. 55.
as it had been. In addition to rheumatism that afflicted him after 1855, Mrs. Melville's letters show that on occasion nervousness and mental suffering recurred later, though not to so great a degree as just after *Pierre* was published. Melville's failure as a self-supporting author had also its effects on his general outlook.  

But among other causes which contributed to his pessimism, his failure to find any satisfactory religious or philosophical explanation of the universe stands out as most significant. At the time he completed *Pierre*, Melville's disillusionment in God and man had brought him to the nadir of despondency. He was now farther from religious peace than he had ever been before.

The last portion of his life presents the pathetic enigma of one who, unable to reconcile himself to the loss of his early faith, spent much time reasoning on the same old problem. The gloominess of his spiritual state during his latter life is revealed perhaps most forcibly by his reaction to his visit to the Holy Land. He went to the Holy Land in an effort to recapture the true spirit of Christianity. His journal shows that all he found was disillusionment. He commented that "...no country will more quickly dissipate romantic expectations that Palestine — particularly Jerusalem."

Thus the youthful "prodigal son" who left the protective ark of safety his family had established for him became the rebel against the universe he could not understand. His natural inclination was to believe in and to reverence and worship the Supreme Being. He had inherited an unusually strict religious background. He

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could not hold firm to his inherited faith when he saw the exploitation of unlearned people by representatives of the Christian faith who did not practice what they taught concerning Jesus Christ. He spent much of his time reading, talking, and searching for the peace of mind which passeth understanding. He was never again a complacent believer or a happy disbeliever because of his inherited religious proclivity.
CHAPTER II
EXEMPLIFICATIONS OF RELIGIOUS ELEMENTS IN MELVILLE'S FICTION

It is the purpose of this chapter to discuss specific exemplifications of the many religious elements which Herman Melville used in his fiction. An observance of where these elements are used in his novels and an analysis of the implications of their uses will also be made.

Melville's tales give the impression that the author is often drawing upon personal experience and stating personal problems, that, in one way or another, he is seeking to establish fictional representations of himself, of the differing sides of his own temperament, of the personal situation in which he finds himself.¹

So said Richard Chase in his edition of Melville's writings. This statement necessitates the further examination of Melville's major prose works in order to grasp the gems of truth from the embroidered fancy of his fiction.

Thompson says in his famous discourse on Melville that

Melville's spiritual idiom controlled and determined his artistic idiom. The plots of his novels were frequently selected to represent, in vivid and dramatic pictures, his so-called heretical and blasphemous views.²

It is most interesting to note, however, that in Melville's early fiction there is nothing blasphemous or skeptical.

In Typee, his first book, Melville evoked his dream world of an ideal community...with a good deal of simple and passionate faith. The Typee Valley is very much like Milton’s Paradise. According to R. Stanton, Typee is Melville’s Eden. Like Adam and Eve the Typee natives have no problems in their blissful state. No cares, griefs, troubles, or vexations affect the natives. Like Adam and Eve they are physically beautiful, much more so than the nearby Nukuheva natives. They have no congenital deformities, and sickness is almost unknown among them. There are no criminals in Typee. Twice Melville speaks of their wearing the “garb of Eden.” The native girl Fayaway is the Eve of the Eden.

Writing about his personal experience in this South Sea Island, Melville immediately turned to the Biblical description of man’s first home to describe for his readers the ideal state he had discovered in the primitive Typee Valley. For Melville, primitive life exhibited an organization that makes harmony in human relations not a state of exalted virtue but simply a matter of the ordinary every day course of things.

Melville noted that the most important phase of the social life of the Typee natives was their religious life, which he portrays accurately and with great care. Their worship consisted of two distinct parts—pagan and Christian. He did not condemn their paganism as he observed their rituals. Melville watched the efforts of the natives to symbolize man and the hereafter with a reverent, sympathetic attitude. Out of respect for and appreciation of their reverence of his religion,

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3 Ibid.
4 Franklin, op. cit., p. 226.
5 Helen Price, "Melville’s Attitude Toward Darker Races." (Unpublished Master’s Thesis, Department of English, Atlanta University, 1939), p. 27.
he did not pry into theirs:

...As the islanders always maintained a discreet reserve with regard to my own peculiar views on religion, I thought it would be excessively ill bred in me to pry into theirs.\(^1\)

He was greatly impressed by one of the pagan beliefs and gave an accurate account of it. He described how the effigy of a dead warrior had been placed in a canoe and stationed in a secluded section of the valley, representing a warrior taking his journey to the land of the unknown. When Melville questioned Kory-Kory, his faithful servant, about this, he replied:

...the chief was paddling his way to the realms of bliss, and breadfruit - the Polynesian heaven - where every moment the breadfruit trees dropped their ripened spheres to the ground, and where there was no end to coconuts and bananas, there they reposed through the livelong eternity upon mats made finer than those of Typee; and everyday bathed their glowing limbs in rivers of coconut oil.\(^2\)

This possibly showed Melville that it was the natural inclination of all human nature to hope for a better life after death. Thus, at the beginning of his literary career, he seemingly possessed an abiding faith in the God of the universe whom he had learned of as a boy.

The reference of Jesus in *Typee* as "divine and gentle" implies that if Melville at the time of writing that book did not believe in Christ as a supernatural being, he at least profoundly admired Him.\(^3\)

One of the first things in Christianity that disappointed Melville was the aloof manner in which the missionaries held themselves, not only from the natives

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\(^1\) *Typee*, p. 122.


\(^3\) Braswell, *op. cit.*, p. 38.
but from any forlorn human being with whom they came in contact. He relates in
*Omoo*, his second book, how on one occasion the missionary sisters became hysterical
when he, a lowly sailor whom they considered beneath their station in life, greeted
them one evening.

Good evening ladies, exclaimed I, at last, advancing winningly, a
delightful air from the sea, ladies! Hysteries and hartshorn! Who
would have thought it? The young lady screamed, and the old one
came near fainting. As for myself, I retreated, in double quick time,
and scarcely drew breath until safely housed in the Calaboozo.¹

Melville relates also how every effort was made by the missionaries to keep
the natives separate in social activities. Even the schools for the missionary
children were separate to prevent the white children from being morally contami-
nated with the wicked little savages.²

The two races are kept as far as possible from associating; the
avowed reason being, to preserve the young whites from moral contam-
ination. The better to insure this end, every effort is made to
prevent them from acquiring the native language.³

These incidents were imprinted indelibly on the mind of the young Melville.
His experiences at this impressionable stage of his life were teaching him harsh
lessons concerning religious practices among Christians. The Christ of his home-
life was being grossly misrepresented by His emissaries in foreign fields

Melville again observed, with some irony, the state of affairs in the
Sandwich Islands:

¹*Omoo*, p. 283.
²*Price, op. cit.*, p. 32.
³*Omoo*, p. 295.
Behold the glorious result! The abominations of Paganism have given way to the pure rites of the Christian worship - the ignorant savage has been supplanted by the refined European! Look at Honolulu, a community of disinterested merchants, and devoted self-exiled heralds of the cross, located on the very spot that twenty years ago was defiled by the presence of idolatry. What a subject for an eloquent Bible-Meeting orator! Nor until I visited Honolulu was I aware of the fact that the small remnant of the natives has been civilized into draught horses, and evangelized into beasts of burden. But so it is. They have been literally broken into the traces, and are harnesses to the vehicles of their spiritual instructors like so many dumb brutes.¹

In Typee and Omoo, pagan priests like Kolory, the "Lord Primate of Typee," play their part with good-natured, unconcerned, primitive humbuggery; Christian priests not only deceive the natives, but humiliate and enslave them while hypocritically deceiving the folks back home about the native religion and the progress of Christianity in Polynesia. The narrator of Omoo hears the malicious and self-seeking sermon of a Tahitian Missionary; the narrator of Typee sees the line of wagons parked on Sunday before the elegant chapel of Christianity, each wagon drawn by two naked natives.²

Melville considered these alarming incidents very unethical, and they caused his growing concern regarding orthodox Christian teachings. He marvelled that the ideals of Christ were not exemplified in the daily lives of the missionaries.

H. Bruce Franklin states that

Typee and Omoo represent the first definable probings of Melville's ever widening and ever deepening exploration of comparative religion. In both books Melville apparently weighs primitive religious beliefs and practices against those of the Christianity practiced in Polynesia, and the scales seem very nearly level ... The narrators of Typee and Omoo profess an orthodox Christianity, but they weigh the beauty, happiness, health, and childish simplicity of the natives before Christianity comes to the islands against their deformities, misery, disease, and hypocrisy.
after. Still professing orthodox Christianity, the narrators seem to weigh jolly old fraudulent native priests, who possibly are cannibals, against viciously deceptive Christian priests, who certainly are rapacious predators. The weighing of each result in clearly writing out its "Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin"  

Thus by using the theme of a perfect community in his first two books, a theme shared by many American dreamers, Melville began his quest in art and life.

_Mardi_ is the first of Melville's works which does not assume an ideal religion but which represents a quest for it, questioning all that the quest discovers. Because there is no assumed religion in _Mardi_, any theology may or may not be mythology and any myth may or may not be divine.  

_Mardi_ draws upon mythologies of Hindus, Polynesians, Incas, Hebrews, Greeks, Christians, Romans, and Norse, and compares them to one another and to man's other myths and his idols. _Mardi_ quests through these myths and idols for a truth behind and beyond them. 

In serenia, the "Land of Love" in _Mardi_, all human relationships and the relationship between man and God are based on the teachings of Christ, but here these teachings are stripped clean of the corruptions of _Maramma_. In the section of _Mardi_ on _Maramma_, Melville indicts some of the worst elements in the worship of Christ through the centuries. In that on Serenia he indicates what Christ might mean to those who concentrated on the vital ideas of His teachings.

On this isle there is no monarchy, but a democracy built on the belief that as the sons of God all men are equal. In the economic system of Serenia, there is private ownership of goods, and some have more than others; but the weak are not exploited by the strong, and none are allowed to suffer through want. In his

1. Franklin, _op. cit._, p. 227.
2. Ibid., p. 17.
3. Ibid., p. 13.
New Testament, Melville marked verses in Acts describing what happened on the Day of Pentecost when Peter preached and three thousand souls were converted. "And all that believed were together and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need." Thought of such a system may have been behind the statement that the social system of Serenia is imperfect, and long must remain so.

In Serenia man is not considered vile, as in Haramma; nor, on the other hand, is he believed to be capable of perfection. He is thought to have in his heart a germ of goodness which can be developed. The vicious are separated from the virtuous until they are reclaimed, but the treatment they are given soon remedies their defects.

There are no temples in Serenia: "Alma (Christ) preached in open fields, and must his worshippers have palaces?" Money that might have been used for temples is used for charity. There is no priesthood in Serenia. This fact emphasizes all of Melville's criticisms of the clergy. Here all are apostles, living their religion every day in the week and worshipping in a simple, informal way.

Thus in Mardi, we note Melville's growing dissatisfaction with Christianity as it existed in his day and his setting forth of the principles of Christianity which he believed essential for an ideal community. Mardi plainly shows how the question of the nature of God perplexed him. In Mardi, much of the religious satire centers upon the Holy Island of Maramma, literally a Polynesian island replete with fetishistic idols, allegorically both the Vatican and Palestine.

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1. Ibid.
4. Franklin, op. cit., p. 15.
5. Ibid.
Babbalanja gives the world his definition of religion strictly in terms of this world:

My Lord! My Lord! Out of itself religion has nothing to bestow. Nor will she save us from aught, but from the evil of ourselves. Her one grand end is to make us wise; her only manifestations are reverence to Oro and love to man; her only, but ample reward, herself.¹

This is Melville's viewpoint at this stage of his development. It is very similar to the Biblical quotation of Ecclesiastes which says, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter, fear God and keep His commandments for this is the whole duty of man."²

Fourth in order of composition, Redburn is the first work to give free expression to that circumstantial sense of human character which was soon to become habitual and preoccupying with Melville — Berthoff says this was

...the sense that the moral pattern within which any man's character mysteriously enacts its life is essentially contingent rather than connate or self-made, and its aspect and direction are determined simply by the successive accidents of this or that life history.³

Redburn and White Jacket do not present Melville's personal concern over theological problems. The references to God, immortality, and the like are very much in the conventional manner. Melville wrote these books in an effort to engage the attention of a Christian people.⁴ Yet in each work he has an exhortation to make which reveals a good deal about his religious idealism

¹Mardi, p. 79.
²Ecclesiastes 12:13.
³Berthoff, op. cit., p. 33.
⁴Braswell, op. cit., p. 41.
He ridicules chaplains on worships, preaches against war, and refers to the Christian principle of turning the other cheek. "If you are a Christian, you cannot, even if you are a war-voting bishop, get by the fact that Christ enjoins us to turn the other cheek. No war, not even a war of defense, is more righteous than another." 1

Melville frankly assumed the role of the Christian reformer in *White-Jacket.* By adaptation of Christian phraseology he made his appeal more effective and presented his own views in order to persuade others to be of the same opinion. *Mardi, Redburn,* and *White-Jacket* showed Melville's keen awareness of the existence of evil. On the other hand he was still agonizingly conscious of the beauty of Christ's idealism. The Sermon on the Mount was to him "the greatest real miracle of all religions" because it shows Christ's vivid awareness of the evil in the world and expresses His "inexhaustible ... tenderness and loving kindness" for mankind. 3 *Mardi* and *White-Jacket* testify that the teachings of Christ were among the major influences on Melville's idealism.

The story of *Pierre* is the story of a Christian youth, who, by trying to become symbolically and ethically a new Christ, becomes symbolically and ethically a pagan god; who in trying to be a saviour becomes the destroyer of all that he tries to save. 4 The story opens by showing Pierre in a pastoral paradise and in an idyllic romance. With the arrival of Isabel, his illegitimate half-sister, all idylls end. Pierre faces his central ethical problem: should he publicly avow his sister and give her the love his father's sins denied her? If he does, he knows that he will disgrace his father and destroy his mother. He believes that the only answer to his problem is to avow Isabel but not as a sister. This he realizes will

2 Braswell, loc. cit., p. 50.
3 Ibid., p. 35.
4 Ibid.
destroy Lucy, but he sees the "all including query" as "Lucy or God." He decided to save everybody except Lucy by pretending to marry Isabel and then taking her to the city. Pierre thus leaves his conventional and conventionally pious mother in order to uphold the name of his dead, unconventional, sinning father (whom he had previously regarded as a kind of god); thus he rejects the fair, virtuous, and innocent Lucy, who seems to represent Heaven, in order to accept completely the mysterious dark lady, Isabel, who seems to represent nature. He abandons his country and moves to the hellish city. He renounces society, law, and customs to follow what seems to him the transcendent ethic of Christ. The central irony develops when Pierre, by embracing what seems Christ's message coming from His heart, finds himself incestuously embracing his sister. ¹

In Pierre, evil is largely social and ethical. After Pierre finds "the perfect marble form" of his earthly father grossly imperfect, there are dark hints that his heavenly father may be equally imperfect. He finds that "silence is the only voice of our God." Those who think they have heard from this God are as absurd "as though they should say they had got water out of stone; for how can a man get a voice out of silence?" ²

Pierre begins as an innocent child in the little ordered paradise of his family's estate; He ends as an impotent Titus, borne down into hell, but struggling to assault heaven. In his dream vision at the end he sees himself an Enceladus, an uncarved mass of stone, half-buried in rocky earth, threatening with his armless trunk to batter the heaven which has cast him down. It is because Pierre believes "that man is a noble, god-like being" that he is destroyed. ³ By defying

¹Ibid., p. 100.
²Ibid., p. 101.
³Ibid., p. 110.
first his grandfather, father, mother, then Lucy, then Isabel, and finally himself, he kills one of his idols and drags the remaining living ones to death in the granite hell.

Mathalia Wright points out in this story Melville's theme of divine, hidden wisdom. The hero, Pierre, seems determined to enter a realm forbidden to him. He is warned by echoes from the thought and even words of the Hebrew sages. Pierre also gives a prominent place to John's account of the woman taken in adultery. Melville had checked Jesus's reply to the scribe's accusation of her.

In Pierre, Melville refers to the Deity as "the infinite Haughtiness". There is writing of "that all-controlling and all permeating wonderfulness" which, by generality, "is so significantly denominated the Finger of God." Melville continues, "But it is not merely the finger, it is the whole out-spread Hand of God; for doth not the Scripture intimate, that He holdeth all of us in the hollow of His hand? - A hollow, truly."

The capitalization here lends more irony to the passage when one finds that Melville had written Hawthorne to ask whether he did not think there is a slight dash of flunkeyism in the usage of capitalizing the Deity.

There is a significant, deeper meaning applied to the story of Pierre. When in Pierre, Pierre announces his marriage to Isabel, his mother disowns him. In this manner Melville represents the treatment he received from the world when he began cultivating the introspective tendencies of which he had recently become conscious. The death of Pierre's mother symbolizes the end of the influence on Melville's

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1 Wright, op. cit., p. 79.
2 Ibid., p. 80.
3 Ibid., p. 11.
4 Ibid., p. 72.
rational soul of the world that bred him.¹

William Hugh McEviry, Jr., makes the following observation in his dissertation concerning Pierre:

Again and again Melville enters the novel to underscore the pessimistic philosophy which had evolved from his thought and experience. Melville reconciles his acceptance of Christ in this book in a singular fashion. Christ, he insists, came to earth to teach men that while expediency is the proper human philosophy, there man should not forget the comprehensive plan for the universe, though he cannot understand it. Melville himself, obviously, drew little comfort from the thought of a rapprochement incomprehensible to him. He is not happy with the end of his search, but he has faith - fully recorded the results of his thinking for the world to read.²

Howard Vincent says, "Moby Dick was begun August 1, 1819, in a house at six Pearl Street, New York City, for on that day Herman Melville was born." This story, the most widely read of all Melville's works, is a true creative art.

William H. McEviry makes the following statement:

Moby Dick is a tragedy based on the concept which Melville had gained in his own life. There is a comprehension denied to mortals who have, nevertheless, an urge to gain that final comprehension in order to satisfy the highest within them.³

In a letter to Hawthorne just after Moby Dick was published, Melville said, "I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb."⁴ He does not say a book with a wicked character in it; he says a wicked book. It was a decidedly wicked book according to the Christian world in which Melville and Hawthorne lived. By this time of his life, Melville's inability to account for evil had made him

¹Ibid., p. 86.
concludes that the Christian conception of a wholly benevolent Deity is wrong, and he
had arrived at the point where he could give full artistic expression to his heretical
view without suffering pangs of conscience. Melville had to have his say about man's
place in the cosmic scheme of things.

* * * * *

Moby Dick plainly says that the assault on evil. When Ahab strikes at Moby Dick,
the symbol of all spiritual as well as physical evil, he does so in a mad desire for re-
venge on God, whom he holds responsible for its existence. 1 A contemporary French critic
got at the heart of the matter when he said that the only reason Ahab tries to harpoon
Moby Dick is that he cannot harpoon God. 2

H. Bruce Franklin makes this observation:

Moby Dick defines historical truth, psychological truth, metaphysical truth,
and moral truth with much greater precision and with much greater complexity
than does Mardi. In one of the many senses in which it is a book of revelation,
Moby Dick reveals layer by layer, the kinds of truth incarnated by the White
Whale. In the chapter 'Moby Dick', historical, psychological, metaphysical, and
moral truth all meet in the myth of the White Whale. The chapter defines more
extensively than any other Moby Dick's history, what he represents to the minds
of men, and what he symbolizes philosophically and morally... Moby Dick displays
truth as a collection of mysteries, dramatizes these mysteries and myths and
uses Western comparative mythology, to help examine these myths... The White
Whale is defined not only as Ahab's intellectual and spiritual exasperations,
but as 'all evil ... visibly personified.'

Another Melville student has this to say:

In Moby Dick, Melville took as his province man's relation to the entire uni-

verse -- whether it be that mysterious conceptual area where man stations his
gods, or that bothersome physical world on which he subsists, or that darkest
of underworlds, his own unconscious, where he meets himself and is found want-
ing or afraid, 4

1 Ibid., p. 58.
2 Ibid.
3 Franklin, op. cit., p. 54.
These comments of various authorities and students of Melville show his attempt in *Moby Dick* to phathom the unfathomable, to scrutinize the unscrutable with the limited comprehension allotted to man.

Melville is writing of theology and mythology, of kinship and belongingness, of morality and ethics, of madness and psychological peace. Together, these concerns make up Melville's religious vision. Ishmael, that psychic wanderer who is willing to meet himself in the dark, is the player Melville is using to make his positive statement about his religious vision. Ishmael, by finally embodying lessons of Queequeg's tattoos is saved both literally and symbolically. In the novel he is particularly fond of saying two things at once: of insinuating a meaning which was quite contrary to the superficial sense of the overt statement. His overt meanings reflect a sympathy with Christian doctrines of obedience and acceptance; but the underlying and insinuated meaning hinted at a deliberate and sly ridicule of concepts sacred to Christian doctrine. The mystic-religious lesson in Queequeg's tattoos, a "complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth," has been psychically transferred to Ishmael's personality. Queequeg teaches Ishmael the lesson in the tattoos, though both of them are unconscious of the lesson and of the act of teaching. The lesson that he teaches, that is, the ball of twine he gives Ishmael, is symbolized by those tattoos. Queequeg has forgotten their meaning and cannot read the "mystic treatise on the art of attaining truth," for he is not a thinking man. He is a man of feeling. Queequeg has left his island home, self-exiled, to wander on the earth

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2 Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

for the purpose of rediscovering the meanings in his tattoos. But his brain operates
instinctually rather than consciously. He acts out, dramatically, without knowing
it, the lessons in his tattoos.¹

Melville gave Ahab the largest role in Moby Dick; but it is perhaps, not the
most important. His role is Melville's negative statement, his Biblical epic,
"thou shalt not —". Melville and his audience were nurtured on negative, Old Test-
ament tradition.² So he says to all, thou shalt not do as Ahab did. As an exam-
ple for this, Ahab says the Pequod's hull when attacked by Moby Dick is god-
bullied.³ Thou shalt not speak in such a blasphemous manner.

Ahab, who begins his hunt on Christmas Day, who bears a "crucifixion" on his
face, who metaphorically wears the crown made of the nails used in the crucifixion,
and who arises after he "lay like dead for three days and nights," may perhaps be
playing the roles of both the Egyptian and Hebrew saviour.⁴

Moby Dick manifests the intelligence, malice, and power ascribed to him, so
far as these attributes can be visibly and physically manifested. Melville set
against the truth of Moby Dick fishy myths of the Hindus, the Philistines, the
Hebrews, the Greeks, and the Christians. Using all the tricks of both skeptics
and apologists, he exalts the myths of the great White Whale by ridiculing the
fanciful, elaborate, distorted, and embellished versions of the "Oriental" reli-
gions.⁵

In a sense it is true that the White Whale represents the mythological
dragons of both western and eastern tradition. Many critics have suggested Beo-
wulf's battle with Grendel, Chinese dragon myths, Rustam's fight with the Demon,

¹Brasher, op. cit., p. 139.
²Ibid.
³Braswell, op. cit., p. 62.
⁴Ibid.
⁵Ibid.
and the Babylonian Belmerodach's struggles with the dragon Tiamet.¹ The most important of these suggestions is the one introduced by Ahab's name, which introduces the mass of contemporaneous accounts of the Canaanite Baal and Babylonian Belmerodach. The Biblical King Ahab "took to wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal, King of the Zidonians, and went and served Baal and worshipped him."²

Melville knew that white is symbolical of holiness, purity, and divine spotlessness. Among the Romish faith white is specially employed in the passion of our Lord. In the vision of St. John, white robes are given to the redeemed, and the four and twenty elders stand clothed in white before the great white throne. The head and hair of the Holy One that sitteth there is described with the term white like wool. Yet for all these accumulated associations with whiteness and whatever is honorable and sublime, there still lurks an allusiveness in the innermost idea of this hue for Moby Dick which strikes more of panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood.³ There is a super natural awe in his whiteness, which is at once the most meaning symbol of spiritual things, nay, the very veil of the Christian's Deity; and yet the intensifying agent in things the most appalling to mankind.⁴

Melville saw Egyptian mythology as the direct source of the Hebrew mythology and therefore the myth of Christ.⁵ Confronted with the solecisms of the Old Testament's prophecies of the Saviour and the New Testament's biography of the

¹Ibid. p. 70.
²I Kings 16: 30-31.
³Braswell, op. cit., p. 91.
⁴Ibid., p. 60.
⁵Ibid., p. 97.
Minister Mapple in *Moby Dick* is drawn after the Boston Methodist evangelist Taylor. Mapple's prow-shaped pulpit occasions a significant comment:

... the Holy Bible rested on a projecting piece of scroll work, fashioned after a ship's fiddle-headed beak ... the pulpit is ever this earth's foremost part; all the rest comes in the rear, the pulpit leads the world. Yes, the world's a ship on its passage out, and the pulpit is its prow.

Mapple's sermon is on Jonah's disobedience and repentance. "If we obey God, we must disobey ourselves, and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists." As heroic and self-dedicated as Ahab, Mapple nevertheless stands in fundamental contrast:

Delight, top-gallant delight is to him, who acknowledges no law or lord, but the Lord his God, and is only a patriot to Heaven. Delight is to him, whom all the waves of the billows of the seas of the boisterous mob can never shake from this sure keel of the ages, and eternal delight and deliciousness will be his, who coming to lay him down, can say with his final breath - O Father! - chiefly known to me by thy rod - mortal or immortal, here I die. I have striven to be Thine, more than to be this world's or mine own.

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1. Ibid., p. 62.
This section of Moby Dick is the part Mrs. Wright said Melville wrote with his Bible open.1

Ahab, driven by hatred, imperious in self-will, "deliriously" transferring to the White Whale his sense of "malicious agencies" transcends the order of things and sins in anger and pride. "His sin, in the minor sense," Yvor Winters observes, "is monomaniac vengeance; in the major, the will to destroy the spirit of evil itself, an intention blasphemous because beyond human powers and infringing upon the purposes of God," The White Whale need not, in fact, be read as the spirit of evil; "each man reads his own peculiar lesson according to his own peculiar mind and mood." But Ahab reads him so.

Mapple's position is that of faith and devotion, obedience to the Old Testament God, submission to His will, humility which does not invade His province. These evident landmarks from which bearings are taken on Ahab's erroneous course cannot but help guide our judgment. Yet if Calvinistic faith had sufficed to Melville's forebears it did not suffice to him. Ahab exceeds in defiance, but Mapple exceeds in conviction. Melville embodies in Mapple his own powerful sense of the Calvinistic tradition but he cannot endorse this tradition save in respect of its ardour. He embodies in Ahab an antithetical position and an equal ardour, and is emotionally seized by him, as he is by Mapple too.2

Christian heritage might conclude that Melville had deliberately arranged to establish a contrast between Jonah's ultimate obedience to God and Captain Ahab's ultimate defiance; that such a reader might finish Moby Dick with the feeling that Melville had created of his materials an elaborate Christian parable, an exemplum; an object lesson to illuminate the validity of Christian teachings on the rewards for "right reason" or obedience and the punishments for wrong reason, stubborness, defiance.3

In Moby Dick Melville has come to consider his quest for truth and happiness as fatally destructive to all who persist, for the truth of heaven must remain veiled to those limited by the bonds of the earth.4

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1Wright, op. cit., p. 6.
3Thompson, op. cit., p. 10.
4Ibid.
Too frequently readers of Melville have fallen prey to his deliberate ar-
rangement of his fiction to disguise his riddle answers behind the riddle-
marks of his ingenious art. There lies behind naughty uses of Bible quota-
tions or allusions, which may have one meaning in a Christian context, quite a
different meaning as controlled by Melville's anti-Christian context.

The Confidence Man: His Masquerade is Melville's most ambitious work. It
tries to define every important ethical problem known to man; it tries to dramatize
man's epistemological problems. On board the Fidole are heard the voices of
ancient and modern philosophers, poets, and gods. An incarnation of Plato's
Socrates argues with an incarnation of Diogenes; a comic embodiment of Emerson ref-
uses to buy a poem offered by a comic embodiment of Poe. Shapes of Manco Capac,
Christ, Satan, Vishnu, and Buddha direct the action. The Confidence Man traces
western thought from its origins in the East to its ancient gods and philosophers
and to their modern disciples and followers. All acts in The Confidence Man, with
the exception of the last chapter, take place on the first day of April, the time
for the Christian celebration of Easter and the Jewish celebration of Passover se-
ason.

H. Bruce Franklin relates the following account of the story:
The 'advent' of the lamb-like man, Christ's embodiment, comes sudden-
ly and appropriately as the sun rises on April first, the day when the
man's northward equatorial crossing is celebrated variously in the various
parts of the world. The book begins: 'At sunrise on a first of April, there
appeared, suddenly as Manco Capac at the Lake Titicaca, a man in crown
colors, at the water-side in the city of St. Louis.' As the sun passes from
Pisces to Aries, while the Jews are eating the Passchalt lamb and waiting
for the Messiah's herald, while the Christians are celebrating the Resur-
rection of the Paschal Lamb, the Messiah, and while the French are crying
'Poisson d' Avril ' at victims of harmless jokes, one of the Fidole's guests

1 McEwry, op. cit., p. 31.
2 Franklin, op. cit., p. 154.
3 Ibid.
looks down at the sleeping lamb-like man and exclaims, "Odd fish!" The Confidence Man ends when the cosmopolitan, after citing to the old man the Scriptural "Jehovah shall be thy confidence," leads the old man away into the night. The Confidence Man represents all the world's saviour gods.

The lamb-like man is in some sense quite literally a confidence man. He introduces the first statements of confidence to the passengers of the Fidèle; "Charity thinketh no evil... Charity suffereth long and is kind... Charity endureth all things. Charity believeth all things... Charity never faileth." This is the most encompassing confidence there can be.

The most obvious theme of the novel is the failure of Christians to be Christians. The Methodist minister, goaded into anger by the cynic, seized him and shook him "Till his timber-toe clattered on the desk like a ninepin." But Melville's satire on the unchristian leaders of Christ's people is tempered by an honest tribute to the few who carry the Gospels in their acts. The Episcopal Minister was steadfast in his kindness and charity— and was duped for his pains.

When the good merchant, Mr. Roberts, in true charity put his faith in Black Guinea, with the best intentions he paves the way for being fleeced twice and for having his name recorded in the transfer book of the Black Rapids Coal Company. The lamb-like man, whose teachings are put into practice by Mr. Roberts, and the president of the Black Rapids Coal Company, who is apparently registering Mr. Roberts for damnation, are apparently avatars of the same supernatural being. Christ and Satan are the shape-shifting joker known as the Confidence Man.

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1 Franklin, op. cit., p. 183.
2 I Corinthians 13: 4 - 8.
3 The Confidence Man, p. 24.
4 Franklin, op. cit., p. 166.
5 Ibid., p. 177.
In *The Confidence Man* the psychological truth of the avator's teachings leads to ruin, and the historical truth of the avators makes this ruin a joke. Apparently himself truly a god, the *Confidence Man* apparently deceives men into destruction and damnation. ¹ If man in becoming Christ (figuratively), becomes an unwittingly destroyer, then perhaps Christ, in becoming man, becomes the *Confidence Man*.² Melville presents religion in a very cynical light in his portrayal of the *Confidence Man*.³ It is the religious front of the *Confidence Man* that enables him to fleece so many passengers aboard the ironically named steamboat the *Fidèle*. He collects money for the Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum and World's Charity. He inspires confidence by quoting I Corinthians 13. This story portrays man as contemptible or ridiculous.

Melville's *Bartleby* seemingly is written to question Christ's admonitions of Matthew 25: 34-45. There He explains that the least of men (particularly when he appears as a stranger) is the physical representative and representation of Christ.⁴ He further implies that Christ is saying that the individual comes to God and attains his salvation when he shows complete charity to a stranger, and he rejects God and calls for his condemnation whenever he refuses complete charity to one stranger, even "the least of these".

*Bartleby* tests this message of Christ. The narrator's soul depends on his actions toward *Bartleby*, a mysterious, poor, lonely, sick stranger who ends his life in prison. The narrator fulfills the letter of Christ's injunction point by point. He offers money to *Bartleby*, the stranger, so that he may eat and drink. He takes him in, finally offering him not only his office but also his home.

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When he sees that Bartleby is sick, he attempts to minister to him. He alone visits and befriends the stranger in prison. But he hardly fulfills the spirit of Christ's message. His money is carefully doled out; he tries to evict the stranger, offers his home only after betraying him, and then immediately flees from him in the time of his greatest need. It is his demands on the stranger which have made him sick. He visits the stranger in prison only once while he is alive, thus leaving him alone for several days before and after his visit, leaving him to die entirely alone.

Bartleby's story is the story of the advent, the betrayal, and torment of a mysterious and innocent being. Events carefully and pointedly re-enact the story of Christ, and there is nothing funny about it.¹

Benito Cereno appeared first in Putnam's Monthly Magazine in late 1855. In it are many Biblical allusions of significance. There are several shadowy hints that the relationship between Cereno and Babo is like that between Christ and Judas.² In the story the African slaves, embodying savage terror and naked evil, persistently seem to the naive narrator "monks" and "frars" in a monastery.³ They are in fact the allegorical incarnation of the Catholic Church.⁴

Delano, who sometimes obtusely attributes to Cereno characteristics which really belong to Babo, compares Cereno to Judas: "Was the Spaniard less hardened than the Jew, who refrained not from supping at the board of him whom the same night he meant to betray?"⁵ Christ limits the identity of his betrayer with these

¹Ibid., p. 123.
²Ibid., p. 148.
³Franklin, p. 15.
⁵Benito Cereno, p. 34.
words: "But, behold, the hand of him that betrayeth me is with me on the table." At Cereno's last meal on the San Dominick, Babo's hand on the table is given an ominous importance: "For nothing was to be seen but the hand of his servant pushing the canary over towards him."  

Benito Cereno equates the Negro and the church by metaphors and by references to The Cloister Life of Charles the Fifth and to the Bible. Not only does the shadow of the Negro represent the shadow of the church, but it is the heeding of church teaching, the confidence of Christianity, which destroys Cereno. He had confidence: he followed his leader and trusted the slaves. "None wore fetters because the owner, his friend Aranda, told him that they were all tractable." As a result, "on Mount Agonia ... Benito Cereno, borne on the bier, did, indeed, follow his leader." Christ's ultimate message, "Sequere Me," has become the test for Benito Cereno: "Sequid Vuestro Jefe."  

Melville does not make a riddle of the fact that Cereno's complete surrender to Christ and the church brings about a death. 

The Biblical allusions in Benito Cereno are as carefully selected as the historical, and they bear just as heavily on the central meaning. Each alludes to a context which modifies and is modified by the story. The Spanish sailor's "soiled undergarments edged about the neck with a narrow blue ribbon" comes from Numbers 15: 38. "Padlock and key - significant symbols, truly" may be extracted by the usual references of Isaiah 12: 22 and Revelation 3: 7. Daniel 5 explains the significance of the ship's last bottle of canary, which is pushed over by "the hand of his servant, mute as that on the wall."  

One of Christ's addresses, found in John 15: 14-15, to Judas and the other apostles forms an interesting counterpoint with a passage from Benito Cereno:

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1 Benito Cereno, p. 57.  
2 Franklin, op. cit., p. 149.  
3 Ibid.  
4 Ibid., p. 150.
"Ah, master," sighed the black bowing his face, don't speak of me; Babo is nothing; what Babo has done was but duty. "Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you," "Faithful fellow!" cried Captain Delano. "Don Benito, I envy you such a friend; slave I cannot call him."

"Henceforth I call you not servants; ... but I have called you friends."¹

John 15: 15 goes on to explain: "For all things that I have heard of my father I have made known unto you." Babo is "in all things his confidant."

The ground common to most discussion of Billy Budd is the assumption that the story is allegorical - a narrative representation of some universal truth or law or balance of contraries, a parable of good and evil, a re-enactment of the fall, a projected myth of a ritual killing which is also a resurrection. Indeed Billy Budd is full of quickening intimations as to the larger, the perhaps universal circumstance of human life. But the decisive narrative logic and cogency of the story are to be found in an effort which Melville characteristically troubled to furnish precise words for, the effort to "define and denominate certain phenomenal men."² To render in force and detail through all the incident and commentary of his narrative he undertakes to define not universal truth, but certain specific and contingent examples of being and behavior.³

To Professor Norman H. Pearson, Billy Budd is best understood by analogy to Milton's heroic poems:

"What Melville was doing was to try to give in an universalized a as possible ... another reduction of the myth which had concerned Milton ... in the trilogy of his three major works - the Christian

¹ Berthoff, op. cit., p. 184.
² Ibid.
³ Ibid., p. 186.
myth, that is, of the fall from innocence and the promise of redemption. His Billy is Adam, his hanging is a kind of ascension; the yard arm is the true cross.

Whether or not Melville was imitating Milton in his attempt to portray again the problem of man's fall, the religious metaphors in Billy Budd do indeed confirm our sense of a religious depth in Melville's sensibility.

Christ's doctrine of love and His promise of immortality were among the lasting influences in Melville's life. Billy Budd, completed a few months before Melville's death, reaffirms the wisdom of resigning the heart to the fate of man. In this narrative Melville attained more calmness in treating the problem of evil than he had ever attained before. There is no railing at the Deity. Here Melville is not concerned with why evil exists, but with how man should accept its intricate and desolating effect. No attempt at justifying the ways of God to man is made.

Captain Vere and the members of the drumhead court realize the "essential innocence" of Billy Budd. They know that Billy's accidentally fatal blow was struck with no intention of meeting or homicide, but only because, during a moment of stress, the impediment in his speech prevented a normal reply to Claggart's false accusation. If the heart "and" the private conscience had a part in their reaching a verdict, Billy should be acquitted, says Vere. But as officers of a man-of-war their duty is not to attempt analyzing such "a mystery of iniquity", but to enforce military law, "however pitilessly that law may operate."

The austere devotee of military duty letting himself melt back into what remains primeval in our formalized humanity, may in the end have caught Billy to his heart, even as Abraham may have caught Isaac on the brink of resolutely offering him up in obedience to the exacting behest. Billy realizes that Vere is more to be

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1 Ibid., p. 187.
2 Braswell, op. cit., p. 122.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., p. 123.
pitiéd than himself. At the execution Billy's final and only words are, "God bless Captain Vere!" As his body ascends, the fleecy clouds in the east, struck by the sun's first rays, are shot through with a soft glory as the fleece of the Lamb of God seen in mystical vision.\(^1\)

It is especially noteworthy that the understanding chaplain of the ship does not despair at having failed to convert Billy to his own ideas about death and belief about Christ. He feels that innocence is finer than religion.\(^2\) The common sailors are so impressed by the beauty of Billy's character that years later a chip of the spar from which he was hanged is to them "as a piece of the cross."\(^3\)

Thus Melville counseled resignation to the inscrutable laws of the universe. Deeply as man may be grieved by the rigid and sometimes merciless working of these laws, his duty is to accept them and to live this life fully doing the best he can. Christian conscience, mercy, the judgment of God - these are neither directly opposed to martial law nor put aside as meaningless. Doctrines of Christianity are invoked in full support of the Pathos of the story, but assent to them is not what is at stake.\(^4\)

With his hero's dramatic farewell to his old ship, the Rights-of-Man, in the first chapter of Billy Budd, Melville also formally takes leave of that democratic hopefulness which, together, with a belief in the triumph of the christian spirit of brotherhood, had earlier inspired his answer to the observed corruptions of civilized society. For the handsome sailor to demure against impressment would have been in Melville's words, "as idle as the protest of a goldfinch popped into a cage."\(^5\)

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\(^1\) Ibid., p. 123.

\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Billy Budd, p. 374.

\(^4\) Berthoff, op. cit., p. 136.

\(^5\) Billy Budd, p. 292.
But Billy, of course, has no idea of protesting against either his removal from the
Rights-of-Man or anything else implied in the fate of serving on a man-of-war. He
does not question the basic morality of a world governed by the Articles of War. He
accepts it, and in so doing reveals a different order of heroism. No longer "that
cynosure he had previously been," the new foretopman becomes eventually the cyno-
sure of inward eyes. By vindicating the possibility of goodness and innocence in
the face of suffering caused by "natural" depravity, his memory makes life endurable
and spreads comfort over the moment of death.

The tragic acquiescence of Billy Budd is based upon the acceptance of the
social vision as permanently shattered. The hopefulness it represents is perhaps
the only sort possible after such acceptance, even as the heroism of the sacrificial
lamb is the only sort of heroism possible in a world that is felt to be alterable
no longer, but rather given over permanently to the necessity of martial expediency
and fundamentally unchangeable laws. Billy's career exemplifies a way of achieving
grace in a situation where man is like the Handsome Sailor, "a goldfinch popped
into a cage." This is perhaps why Melville's tale speaks so intimately to a
bewildered generation whose social hopes, like those of Melville's own generation,
failed to survive the disillusionment of war-torn history.¹

There is a notable fact about the distribution of the Biblical allusions in
Melville's fiction. Their number mounted as Melville's career developed.² He
echoed the Bible in novels and stories persistently from Typee in 1846 to Billy Budd
in 1891. By actual count they increased from a dozen in Typee to 100 in Mardi and
in Billy Budd to 250 in Moby Dick.³ Melville found the Bible the most wealthy of
all his sources. For him it yielded history, literature, humor, speculation,

¹Franklin, op. cit., p. 278.
²Wright, op. cit., p. 8.
³Ibid., p. 9.
spiritual exercises, and a multiplicity of styles. The Bible was more influential than all else for him. Nathalia Wright noted that

"As he drew upon it, it became also the most influential of all: The link between his inheritance and his achievement, between the abstruse philosophical problems he introduced in every book he wrote and the naturalistic scene and exciting plot which convoyed them."

Therefore the importance of the Bible as a source for Melville cannot be underestimated.

C. H. Holman said:

Melville was not an original writer, or an inventive writer. He was absorptive and convertive, a magnificent transformer of material, enriching it by the uses to which he put it. He drew on two kinds of source material: his personal experience and the writings of other men.

The use of religious allusions for Melville was to state his own mental anguish, to set forth his personal ideals in view of stated Christian principles, and to have his say to the world regarding religious doctrines. He moves from an unquestioning faith in idealism to a great skepticism and finally to resignation.

There is almost universal agreement that the King James Bible far outranked all other books as a source for Melville. He came from Dutch Reformed background that assured him an early knowledge of the Bible; but he did not merely know it from childhood acquaintance, he turned to it throughout his life ... Thus the Bible was a portion of his unconscious patterns of thought and properly can be called an experimental source as opposed to a literary source.

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1 Ibid., p. 7.
2 Ibid.
4 Ibid., p. 479.
As for Melville's characters, they seek either ideal form or ideal action.

Nathalia Wright says they

All are engaged in one intense, superhuman, eternal quest: the quest for the absolute amidst its relative manifestations. All Melville's plots describe this pursuit, and all his themes represent the delicate and shifting relationship between its truth and its illusion.

The metaphysical and even more moral implications of this quest are never entirely clear, for the reason that the two realms of thought were never distinct in Melville's mind. So thoroughly was his thought imbued with ethical precepts that he could not consider the world without them.

Melville's images also reflect most apparently his use of the Bible. Moses in his fiction are Scriptural ones. Generally more prominent in his images are persons, and most conspicuous of all kings. Captain of the Pequod is compared to King Ahab and Belshazzar; the harpooner baggs to King Ahasuerus; the fin back whale to King Abah's sundial. Most of the Biblical incidents to which Melville referred repeatedly are events of violence and destruction and events of vision and revelation. He frequently mentioned dreams of Daniel and John, the ascension, Pentecost, Jacob's ladder, adoration of seraphims, and the appearances of angels and archangels. These images cannot be mistaken as mere coincidences. They are too numerous to be called anything other than deliberate.

1 Wright, op. cit., p. 77.
2 Ibid., p. 20.
CHAPTER III

EFFECTIVENESS OF MELVILLE'S USE OF RELIGIOUS ELEMENTS IN HIS FICTION

"As Melville himself changed from 'the idle singer of an empty day' into an artist of deep compassion and savage indignation, his growth as a man was accompanied by an equivalent and necessary growth as a literary artist". The preceding statement by Howard Vincent reflects the artistic maturation of Melville as exhibited in his major fiction. The far-reaching effectiveness of Melville's prose because he manipulated religious elements so masterfully will be discussed by the writer in this chapter. The writer will also use literary criticisms of Melville to show his remaining influence on contemporary society.

On September 28, 1891, an old man died quietly at 104 East 26th Street, New York City. He had been living there twenty-eight years, earning his living as a customs inspector. His death received three lines of notice in one newspaper. Today, his name, Herman Melville, is one of the most famous in American Literature. The libraries hold not only his books but books about him. His principal work, Moby Dick, appears in a popular edition of the Ten Greatest Novels of the World. When first published in 1851, it was so neglected that for the rest of his life Melville thought of himself as a failure. The book was published again in 1920,

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1 Howard Vincent, op. cit., p. 6.
3 Ibid.
thirty years after his death, and began gathering praise and acclaim. Its sales are now climbing toward the millions. 1 The revival of interest in Moby Dick is one of the most dramatic reversals in all literary history. 2

There is an explanation for this "literary death and resurrection of Moby Dick." Mr. Eastman states that in one sense Melville's masterpiece "was seventy years ahead of its time; in another, it was three hundred forty years out of date." 3 Although almost two years of the life described in his adventure books were spent on board whaling vessels, the terrible enterprise of killing a whale is never described in them. "But as a subject for tragic drama, whale hunting as practiced in the nineteenth century had hardly an equal in size and grandeur. Beside it, bullfighting is a sport for kittens." 4 This intriguing plot along with the deeper meanings that this particular whale symbolizes are the cause for much literary search and interpretation. Deeply moved by the problem of free man confronting his own destiny, Melville made Ahab defy God and nature. 5

Seventy years later and thirty years after Melville's death, a noted English critic announced that he had been induced to read this forgotten book, and that "having done so, I hereby declare that since letters began there never was such a book, and that the mind of man is not constructed so as to produce another; that I put its author with Rabelais, Swift, Shakespeare." 5 Within a

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1 Ibid., p. 183.
2 Spiller, op. cit., p. 80.
3 Berthoff, op. cit., p. 183.
4 Ibid., p. 185.
5 Spiller, op. cit., p. 81.
6 Ibid.
decade, the forgotten custom's inspector was recognized as one of the great writers of all times.

If *Moby Dick* could be called a superficial whaling adventure no amount of acclaim would have been attributed the already forgotten Melville which would have him recognized in this space age as an artist of literary repute. Howard Vincent states that:

*Moby Dick* is rich and complex above any other novel in American Literature. With a boldness of plan and a breadth of scope unequaled since the Renaissance, with a wealth of unusual experience in the worlds of the familiar and unfamiliar, with a penetrating understanding of the significance inherent in the varied phenomena of its age, and with a vigor of animal spirits which sweeps all before it, *Moby Dick* brings into magnificent focus the emergent forces of the western world as Melville lets man search for paradise.¹

Berthoff makes the following comment:

With *Moby Dick*, much that is excitingly predicated in the earlier narratives is splendidly fulfilled - the metaphor of the ship as a world which was announced in the sub-title of *White Jacket*, the world-spanning prospect of *Mardi*, the intuitions of general human nature and conduct which underscore *Redburn*. Seemingly the whole thronged phenomenal world of actual human life and enterprise has been brought actively and expressly into view ... The widening awareness which mark the growth of his mind have crystalized in *Moby Dick* into a vivid and comprehensive conception of the given world and how it goes, and of the varieties of life it naturally harbors as well as of what forces may ultimately preside over it.²

It is therefore not surprising that Carl Van Doren calls *Moby Dick* the epic of the ocean.³

The grave obsession that Melville had for things related to religious idealism and ethics was observed by Nathalia Wright. She states that

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¹Vincent, op. cit., p. 8.

²Berthoff, op. cit., p. 13.

The overweening aspiration of all Melville's great characters is the measure of the great thematic purpose of their lives. They seek either ideal form or ideal action. All are engaged in one intense, superhuman, eternal quest; the quest for the absolute amidst its relative manifestations. All Melville's plots describe this pursuit, and all his themes represent the delicate and shifting relationship between its truth and its illusion. The metaphysical and moral implications of this quest are never entirely clear for the reason that the two realms of thought were never distinct in Melville's mind. So thoroughly was his thought imbued with ethical precepts that he could not consider the world without them.¹

In his tales Melville concerned himself with the exploration of the dark places of human life and civilization.² These general areas gave him sufficient leeway for correlating religious elements from the Bible with his themes and plots in order to set forth the idealism of his early philosophy. Likewise in his latter works when blackness has moved into the center of the universe, he acknowledges still the brightness that is the other side of life. He is able to do this by interweaving facts from his experience, his Calvinistic religious background, his observations of human nature, and his inventive genius. While probing "at the very axis of reality" he wandered upon many questions of universal interest and debate. These probings are responsible for his thrust from the nineteenth into the twentieth century.

Melville shared with Cooper a very aggressive Americanism. To him, as to Cooper, the mystique of democracy extended far beyond the Anglo-Saxon world and embraced all peoples and races in one brotherhood of humanity.³ Interracial "civic friendship" is a constant theme of both novelists. The crew of the whaling boat as we have it in Moby Dick is a motley crowd drawn from almost all the nationalities of the world, not to mention those of the nether world.⁴ This acculturation

¹Wright, op. cit., p. 219.
²Kaul, op. cit., p. 214.
³Kaul, op. cit., p. 213.
⁴Ibid.
of all races in one community was somehow connected in Melville's imagination with
the meaning of democracy and the true meaning of Christianity. It stressed his reli-
gious feeling of all humanity's oneness before God. Reviewing Parkman's The Oregon
Trail in 1849, Melville took exception to one historian's contemptuous attitude
toward the American Indians, reminding him that even the civilized nations had, at
one time or the other passed through a stage of savagery.

We are all of us - Anglo-Saxons, one head, and made in one image.
And if we regret this brotherhood now, we shall be forced to join
hands hereafter.\textsuperscript{1}

There is little doubt that Melville meant for his final story, \textit{Billy Budd},
to be in some manner exemplary. He found it to be profoundly moving and he
"believed" in it.\textsuperscript{2} Richard Chase said that

\textit{...Billy Budd...} remains immensely moving as a drama of pathos and myth.
In this respect, its kinship is with the late plays of Shakespeare and
with the New Testament in its affirmation that out of the death inflicted
by nature and society there issues new life.\textsuperscript{3}

Berthoff observed that

...the religious metaphor in \textit{Billy Budd} do indeed confirm our sense
of a religious depth in Melville's sensibility. Reaching the limit
of observation and analysis in his presentation of John Cloggart, he
turns for a clinching notation. Now what he was trying to express
seems sufficiently identified in that precisely climatic phrase,
which perfectly secures his idea of the 'something defective and
abnormal' in the constitution of the master-at-arms.\textsuperscript{4}

Another enlightening observation regarding \textit{Billy Budd} by Nathalia Wright is that

In the same Gospels whose ethics Melville continued to admire and
reject was another theme which for its greater realism, came to have

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Berthoff, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 197.}
\footnote{Herman Melville: \textit{Selected Tales and Poems}, (ed) Richard Chase
(New York, 1960), p. XV.}
\footnote{Berthoff, \textit{loc. cit.}}
\end{footnotes}
deeper and deeper meaning for his, and which he never associated with the missionary Sermon on the Mount at all. It was the instinctive and irreconcilable conflict of good and evil, which in the New Testament issued in the crucifixion of Jesus. This is the theme of *Billy Budd*. 1

There have been several attempts to make *Billy Budd* comparable to Milton's attempt to reanimate the Christian myth of human destiny under divine law. 2

*Billy Budd* has been continuously praised for its gravity and poignancy in subject and style. What it asserts emphatically through its truth abiding captain and the handsome sailor is an image of a gravely radiant virtue of spirit -- natural magnanimity, which is exemplary of Melville's own character and career. 3

Melville himself recognized and characteristically specified the great chance he was taking in falling back on the "lexicon of Holy Writ" while writing. He felt that the age in which he lived had grown indifferent to the Bible and could no longer be relied on to understand all that might be involved in it. 4 His point in this respect is well-taken. For our time is not so much skeptical of religious doctrines and symbols as Melville was personally. There is certainly little evidence of the passionate burdensomeness which he exhibited for such a long time.

Bruce Franklin concludes that

One of Melville's purposes in exploring other myths is always to evaluate the myth of Christ. "Alma," the Christ of the religion of the heart, defines the central tensions of *Mardi*. Taji misses divine religion in his imitation of mythic divinity. Ahab takes the next step; wholly ignoring the Christain morality for which Starbuck speaks, he commits himself to the role of Christ's predecessor and possible prototype -- Osiris, the Egyptian hunter of the demon. Pierre takes the final step; in his moral imitation of Christ he attains the crucifixion and apotheosis of a Christ, and in becoming Christ he unwittingly destroys all whom he is trying to save. Don Alexandro Aranda

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1Wright, op. cit., p. 126.
2Berthoff, loc. cit.
3Ibid., p. 17.
follows Christ and induces Benito Cereno to have confidence. As a result naked evil, defined metaphorically as the Catholic Church, makes of both Aranda and Cereno symbolic Christs to follow to destruction. The implication for Melville was clear: if man, in becoming Christ, becomes an unwitting destroyer, then Christ in becoming man, perhaps, becomes the confidence man.

Melville gives us a fundamental sensation of the strange way of life we have, and his accounts and interpretations may compose a great part of our own understanding of the ways of God and the ways of man. The freedom of view and personal constraint in Melville's work appear deeply temperament, or constitutional. His extraordinary capacity of expression gives the impression that he himself had not merely imagined but had substantially created through actual experience the bulk of life which is found in his works. It has been noted that he...

... dramatizes the judgment put on society by the innocent suffering of those it makes its victims and outcasts. He projects the versatility of the self, the love of comrades, and the pathos of the democracy of death as richly and compassionately as Whitman. He also gives with unconstraint... the known world on its own manifold and fantastic terms. He takes us somewhat closer within the custom of life and forms of association familiar to him, to the developed natural order of established human existence.

What an English admirer called, some years after his death, the "peculiar charm and bonhomne" of his writing seem to have been in good part a natural overflow of the personal vivacity and geniality emphasized in almost every account of him in the half dozen years after Typee. His Pittsfield neighbor, Mrs. Sarah Morewood, felt obliged to take note, writing to one of the Duyckincks (December 28, 1851), of Mr. Melville's excessive freedom in serious conversation. She mentioned specifically his "religious views" and "irreverent language," and then a certain heedlessness or indifference, at social gatherings, to the sensibilities of others.

1 Franklin, op. cit., p. 205.
2 Berthoff, op. cit., p. 23.
3 Ibid., p. 21.
4 Ibid., p. 23.
5 Ibid.
One French critic essayed the following comments:

Melville, devoting himself without restraint to the forming of his work and to a corresponding mastery of letters, has as his unique and irreplaceable contribution to have made so brave a show of renewing the lost opportunities of that life which, however often it defeats us and however finally, is the one life we are given, and which still (by a reciprocal charity it would take a life's work even to learn the extent of) remains somehow to be made.\(^1\)

There is no argument that Melville found words to say all that he was moved to say with thoroughness and consistency. The explanations for his stories are not usually simple, but they are not short-circuited or evasive, and they are not obscure. He summons the energy and patience to follow through to an end for all his literary work. To come into the presence of such a writer is to experience a broadening of apprehension - a positive strength of capability.

The authority his name and work still have for us testifies to the gravity of his themes and the amplitude of his address to them.\(^2\) One observes that Melville is in the tradition of American writers who combine confession of personal experience with the task of truth-divining and witness bearing.\(^3\) In a further attempt to summarize the far-reaching effectiveness of Melville and his use of "Holy Writ," Berthoff says,

The decisive immediate virtue in Melville is not limited to special operations like encyclopedic description or the analysis of character. Rather it is generic and constitutional. It marks his simplest rendering of physical objects and actions, it equally animates the moral and psychological probings of his most strenuously ambitious work. After a thirty year interval it is as strong as ever in Billy Budd, though much else had gone by the board. Scurcely a sentence in Melville's best writing is not stamped with its urgency: an odd adjective; a defining participle; an unexpected sequence of verbs; circuitous and often distracting parentheses - all aimed at discovering the precise and entire mode of existence of the matter at hand.\(^4\)

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\(^1\) Cesare Pavese, "The Literary Whaler," Sewanee Review, LXVIII (Summer, 1962), 418.

\(^2\) Berthoff, op. cit., p. 204.

\(^3\) Ibid.

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 206.
It must be admitted that Melville will lay it all open and he will get it all said. Many authorities feel that Melville will long be remembered as a great writer of the world. James Miller states that

Ironically enough, Melville was to produce a work of his own, Pierre - which would link his name with Sophocles of Oedipus and the Shelley of Cenci. Pierre's portrayal of the protagonist's complex attitude toward his mother places Melville squarely in the tradition of those authors who have dared to deal with the intricate and agonized aberrations of human behavior.¹

Melville was greatly concerned for all humanity. Willard Thorp observed that

Though the business of operating a ship never interested him, Melville felt a deep concern for the destination of the inhabitants of the world which the ship enclosed. He pondered the social relationships, the code of life and manners, the clash of individual on individual, which determined the nature of this compact, artificial society, and endeavored to relate what he saw there to the larger society which dispatched the ship on its errands of commerce or war.²

What is at the heart of his treatment of his characters is not a philosophy of fate, chance, and free will in the actions of men but a moral apprehension of the lifelong course of existence natural to the human individual.³

Melville had wisdom enough not to preach to individuals in his writings. His technique of propaganda was a most subtle approach, especially with religious elements. Nathalia Wright says

No strictly historical Jesus, as revealed by the Markan tradition, could be as moving as what the mind has made of him: a perfect nature, the idealism of whose ethic commanded adoration if not imitation. So he appears on all Melville's pages, a symbol of the state to which man aspires, as Adam is of the simplicity from which he rose ... Melville employed the Bible symbolically and allegorically to effect a transition between the two realms of fiction and religion ... to capture the 'ungraspable phantom of life.' ⁴

¹ James E. Miller, Jr., "Melville's Quest in Life and Art." South Atlantic Quarterly, LVIII (November, 1959), 602.
² Willard Thorp, op. cit., p. xcvi.
³ Berthoff, op. cit., p. 96.
⁴ Wright, op. cit., p. 18.
Thus deeply does the influence of the Bible on Melville go beyond quotation and allusion, beyond allegory to true inspiration.¹

Melville's death led to renewed attention to his work, but he had to wait a generation for the excited revival which set him in the rank among major writers. Since 1922 there have been four times as many editions of Moby Dick in America and England as during all the years before, and more than ever of all his chief books. He had been at once a hero to literary rebels and the object of much academic research. His writings link him with many today who are yet "seekers and not finders" of a satisfactory answer for the mysteries of our existence.

Because Melville was an ardent searcher in the nineteenth century, many twentieth century readers and writers are reviewing his works as they too try to "fathom the unfathomable." His use of religious elements to explore absolute right — good and evil, is more comprehensively contemporary in this age than it was in his own.

The following is a compliment to his skill and adeptness with religious elements in his writings:

Today the students of American letters pursue the mysteries of Melville's life and of his writings. Learned and literary quarterlies now devote a high percentage of space to Melville's studies; even Hollywood has profitably paved two of the novels, and the rugged, scarred face of Ahab has appeared on the screen in the romantic profile of John Barrymore. Serious critics name him as the single American author worthy of a place among the great world writers, one of the few American writers whose genius transscends national boundaries. Melville is unquestionably the phoenix of American letters.²

The writer has attempted to show through literary criticism the transcendent influence of Melville from his own day into the twentieth century because of his concern with religious elements and philosophical problems. His interweaving of these concerns into his plots and themes causes him to be in the contemporary mainstream of literary thought and research more so than in the Victorian era of which he was a living part.

¹Ibid., p. 18.
²Howard Vincent, op. cit., pp. 4, 5.
CONCLUSION

The writer has attempted to show through an exposition of Melville's background, the themes of his novels, and the nature of his subject matter, that his fiction is primarily concerned with ethical problems and is filled with religious overtones. His personal religious attitudes varied, and these variations are exhibited in his major fiction. As Willard Thorp has noted,

In Typee what mainly engages his attention is the small but perfectly poised Taiipi state. In Omoo his mind turns over the fascinating problem of the impinging of the white man's ideals and vices on another such equil-poised society. In White Jacket what keeps the book together is Melville's steady pressure on the pulse-beat of society in a ship of war. Here he advocates turning the other cheek. Mardi holds up an allegorical mirror in which society in the western world may recognize its own failures. In the latter part of Redburn the main concern is the class-contrast between the horrors in the immigrants black hole below decks and the selfish fear of the cabin passengers. In Moby Dick we are not allowed to forget the crime Ahab commits when his monomania drives the helpless crew of the Pequod with him to destruction. In his mad pursuit of death he has slipped all ties of responsibility which bind man to man. Pierre goes down defeated because he chooses to live by heaven's chronometrical standard and defies the horological measure by which conventional society exists. Finally, in The Confidence Man, in bitterness and indecision, Melville for the moment gives up in despair, doubting whether there is enough of the indispensable stuff of confidence in the hearts of men to make it possible for them to fuse into a decent social order.

All of these works are filled with Biblical allusions and religious implications.

The writer concludes, as did Nathalia Wright, that

The forms of Calvinism did not content him, nor did the formlessness of Transcendentalism ... Finding reality in both form and idea, in both good and evil, Melville's quest for the absolute led him to press beyond the realm in which these conceptions are mutually exclusive toward one in which they are halves of one whole.

1 Thorp, op. cit., p. xcviii.
2 Wright, op. cit., p. 77.
Melville was too honest with himself to accept any doctrine that he did not fully understand. He admitted his skepticism and growing pessimism, but he could never give up his quest for an understanding of many "unscrutable" things. Neither could he believe that the universe had no meaning.

"Melville pondered the problem of evil in order to assert the justice of God's ways."¹ But he found no simple solution to his problem. He does not give one specific answer as a solution for the "mysteries of iniquity."

His quest in art and in life was ever continuing.

Carl Van Doren has ably summarized the conclusion of the whole matter. He said that

An obscure distemper gnawed forever at the core of Melville's peace... He set himself to reduce the mystery of the world to some simple formula, and then to master that formula. He had been inevitably disappointed. Nor was he able to explain his disappointment by reasoning that he must have given too docile a belief to the lessons of idealism. Instead, he clung to his own values and gradually made up his mind to the notion that diabolism was rampant in the universe.

Melville came to no passionate, serene decision that God is always just no matter how incomprehensible His nature. But exhibiting a great hatred for the evil in the world, Melville reveals through his literature as much profound truth as he can possibly achieve in fiction. His work is the product of his unquiet mind. His writings reflect the religious inquiries of his own mind and of the millions who seek after incomprehensible truth. He had to wait until the twentieth century for literary praise and acclamation because the world has only recently caught up with him.

¹Henry Pommer, Milton and Melville (Pittsburgh, 1950), p.16.

²Carl Van Doren, op. cit., p.89.
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56
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