The Dual Vision of Tragedy:
Hero and Choric Figure in the Tragic Novel

by
Tim Gauthier

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ABSTRACT

Lamentations on the absence of tragic texts in the twentieth century center on the untenability of Aristotelian parameters of tragedy within a modern context. These parameters include the immediacy of the dramatic experience as a vehicle for identification with the audience and a hero fully capable of realizing the tragic truth of his existence. Curiously restrained by formal requirements postulated in antiquity, the majority of critics have neglected that modern tragedy may have shed structures no longer culturally relevant while maintaining the essence of the tragic vision. The novel has been largely ignored despite its being perfectly suited for a contemporary communication of the tragic vision. The skepticism shattering the belief that our respective destinies can be fully embodied by another is no obstacle for tragedy in the novel. Through a narrating choric figure acting as mediating consciousness, the novel provides a direct link between reader, hero, and the tragic experience. The very act of narration also sheds light on the creation of the tragic text, extending this link to the tragedian himself. The result is a three-pronged identification, (with the hero, choric figure, tragedian), through which the reader is confronted with the multifarious truths laid bare in the text. These revelations, along with a deliberate absence of closure, compel the reader into the same unending quest to complete the tragic cycle - an experience akin to the catharsis of old.

RÉSUMÉ

On se lamente sur l'absence de textes tragiques au vingtième siècle en s'appuyant sur la notion qu'on ne peut maintenir dans un contexte moderne les paramètres de la tragédie tels que définis par Aristote. Ces paramètres incluent le caractère immédiat de l'expérience théâtrale comme véhicule d'identification entre le public et un héros capable de prendre pleine conscience de la vérité tragique de son existence. Les conditions formelles telles qu'edictées dans l'Antiquité ont curieusement empêché la majorité des critiques de remarquer que la tragédie moderne avait pu se délester de structures dont la pertinence culturelle avait disparu tout en maintenant le sens même de la tragédie. Dans une large mesure, on n'a pas tenu compte du fait que le roman réussissait parfaitement à communiquer aujourd'hui le sens du tragique. Le scepticisme qui a brisé la conviction que la destinée de chacun puisse entièrement se concrétiser chez un autre ne fait pas obstacle au tragique dans le roman. À l'aide d'un personnage chorique qui narre et agit comme conscience médiatrice, le roman lie directement le lecteur, le héros et l'épreuve tragique. De plus, l'acte même de la narration éclaire aussi la création du texte tragique en prolongeant ce lien jusqu'à l'auteur lui même. Le résultat conduit le lecteur à une triple identification (avec le héros, le personnage chorique et l'auteur) qui le confronte aux diverses vérités que le texte lui dévoile. Ces révélations, auxquelles s'ajoute une absence déliberée de fermeture, contraignent le lecteur à la même recherche interminable pour achever le cycle tragique - expérience qui rejoint la catharsis d'autrefois.

PREFACE

Tragedy, replete with all its paradoxes, is a topic too large for any one thesis. In the process of writing, and debating, this thesis it has become obvious to me that I have done little more than scratch the surface. My fairly conventional approach to the texts has allowed me to deal with my primary concern - the reinforcement of the notion of the novel as a tragic form. Any postmodern reading of the texts would clearly uncover another subset of issues and questions, but that would have been another thesis. Over the long haul the people who have helped me are numerous, but I wish particularly to thank Professor Ben Weems for his infinite patience and understanding, Professor Peter Ohlin for coming to the rescue, my friend Brian Trehearne for his support and advice at all times in the unlikeliest of places, and not least Marta Meana whose judgment and insights were, and still are, invaluable to me.

To Mom
Who gave me my first Classics Illustrated

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INTRODUCTION

The critical approach of this thesis might best be termed "generic criticism," since its primary focus is the evolution of tragedy and the role the novel has played in presenting the tragic vision to the modern mind. Although it is often taken for granted that the novel can be "tragic" (ie. *The Tragic Art of Ernest Hemingway*, "Tragedy and Satanism in Camus's *La Chute* "...) [1], few critical studies have been devoted to a close examination of the relationship between tragedy and the modern novel. There has been a critical propensity to align tragedy with drama. The great classical tragedies were written for the theatre and, so the thinking goes, tragedy has remained intrinsically "dramatic." This argument is part of what Gassner has termed the "generic fallacy" - the resistance to the mutable characteristics of a genre, and the inability to see how a genre may be best served by more than one literary form. Even works such as Richard Sewall's *The Vision of Tragedy* and Murray Krieger's *The Tragic Vision* , that accept the novel as a potentially tragic form, fail to offer any explanation for this transmutation.

If we perceive tragedy as the formal containment of the tragic vision - Apollonian restraint and the channelling of Dionysian impulses - we may begin to grasp the problems faced by modern drama in accomplishing this task. The nineteenth century growth of individualism (subjectivity), combined with a gradual breakdown of the communal fabric, introduced the possibility that each man's thoughts are his own and not necessarily comprehensible to his fellow men. With this increasingly solipsistic perspective drama could no longer rely on common faith and a shared understanding of myths, and a gap soon grew between the hero and the audience. One attempt to close this gap came in the form of the novel. With the narrator as mediator, the novel held a clear advantage over drama. Identification with the hero was established through this intermediary who tempered those moments when the reader was apt to feel most alienated by the actions of the hero. Navigating us through the ultimately capricious differences between the hero's experience and our own, the narrator led us to the essence of the hero's experience - an essence remarkably like our own.

The appearance of the modern novel in the 1840's owes a great deal to the Russian and American pioneers of the form who, free from the anxiety of influence, were able to explore and elaborate upon the intricacies of the novelistic form. A number of critics (Auerbach, Sewall, Orr, Torgovnick, for example) point to the century that follows as the era of the modern novel. The evolution of the tragic novel is readily seen through a close reading of three representative novels from this period. Melville's *Moby-Dick* is a transitional text, bridging the gap between old and new concepts of the hero, as well as exploiting the novel for its dramatic and tragic potential. Conrad's *Lord Jim*, primarily for its ironic use of Marlow as narrator, raises a number of questions central to an understanding of tragedy in the twentieth century. Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* examines the distance separating us from the hero, the questions of myth, and our fundamental inability to avoid, despite our best intentions, those failures inherent in our condition. These texts are also representative of the modern novel in terms of their portrayal of the choric figure and the role this figure plays in modern tragedy. These novels also point to a number of other texts that fall into this category: *The Great Gatsby*, *To the Lighthouse*, *La Peste*, *Doctor Faustus*, for example. The question of whether or not the postmodern novel can be tragic is one not dealt with in this thesis. Suffice to say that such a question raises a set of issues all its own.

This thesis adopts a thematic approach to tragedy. The first chapter argues for the inclusion of the novel in the tradition of tragedy and provides an appraisal of its place within that tradition. The second chapter is devoted to an analysis of the hero in the tragic novel, the various difficulties which arise in a modernist conception of the hero, and the shift away from a traditional and centralized view of tragedy. The third chapter examines the role fulfilled by the choric narrator - a figure removed from the tragic action, yet touched and changed by his intellectual attempts to resolve the problems inherent in the action. Finally, the last chapter briefly touches upon some questions raised in the thesis concerning catharsis and how modern expectations and interpretations have affected our definition of the term. The novel poses some particular problems in terms of cathartic effect and tragic closure, and the chapter suggests some possible approaches.

Endnotes

1. See Wirt Williams, *The Tragic Art of Ernest Hemingway* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1981); and John S. Larich, "Tragedy and Satanism in Camus's *La Chute*," *Symposium* 24 (1970): 262-76.

CHAPTER ONE: THE METAMORPHOSIS OF A GENRE

The question of whether it is still possible to create tragic texts, and invoke a sense of tragedy in the modern context, is one that has long intrigued the twentieth century mind. A number of critics suggest this interest in the question of tragedy exists primarily for two reasons: the first is that tragedy is often perceived as the highest form of art, and the second that modern man is all too acutely aware of his inability to create tragic texts. Questions about the comparative loftiness of one art form over another are no longer considered a useful line of inquiry. We continue, however, to be perturbed by modern literature's difficulty in achieving the tragic form. In fact, a number of critical studies disqualify all modern attempts at this endeavour. This thesis offers a rebuttal to these works, and attempts to show that tragedy is indeed written in our time, though it is not meant as an exercise in the definition of tragedy. As a number of critics have themselves noted in their own studies, the amount of research already devoted to defining the genre leaves room for little more than speculative criticism. [1]

The concept of tragedy has undergone some radical changes in the last hundred years or so, not the least of which involves the nagging doubt as to whether modern man still possesses the emotional and spiritual equipment necessary to create, or even perceive, tragic texts. Combined with the lack of any social, cultural, religious, or even mythological fabric to unite individuals, this suspicion has led to pronouncements that tragedy can no longer exist in our age. Viewing the creation of the tragic text as an impossibility is a particularly recent phenomenon, one which was not shared by our eighteenth or nineteenth century predecessors. For Joseph Wood Krutch, one of the first critics to argue "the death of tragedy," the issue is one of belief. In his famous essay, "The Tragic Fallacy," Krutch states that tragedy is:

> ...a profession of faith, and a sort of religion; a way of looking at life by virtue of which it is robbed of its pain. The sturdy soul of the tragic author seizes upon suffering and uses it only as a means by which joy may be

> wrung out of existence, but it is not to be forgotten that he is enabled to do so because of his belief in the greatness of human nature and because, though he has lost the child's faith in life, he has not lost his far more important faith in human nature. A tragic writer does not have to believe in God, but he must believe in man. (86-7)

In Krutch's view, modern man has lost the ability to see himself as anything more than an isolated and weak individual whose life and death mean very little in the greater scheme of things. The heroes of Greek and Shakespearean tragedy felt that there existed a direct correlation between their actions and a Greater Plan, that their existence had some significance on a higher plane. As Krutch argues, the hero of earlier tragedies perceives the physical space that is etched out for him in the universe:

> Occupying the exact center of a universe which would have no meaning except for him and being so little below the angels that, if he believes in God, he has no hesitation in imagining Him formed as he is formed and crowned with a crown like that which he or one of his fellows wears, he assumes that each of his acts reverberates through the universe. His passions are important to him because he believes them important throughout all time and space; the very fact that he can sin (no modern can) means that this universe is watching his acts; and though he may perish, a God leans down from infinity to strike him down. (92)

The objective of Krutch's arguments is to exhibit the degree to which man has debased himself. Without this seemingly naive faith in the greatness of man, Krutch maintains, we fall short of the inner nobility needed to create tragedy.

Krutch insists that in losing this faith man has in fact lost one of the qualities that made him great: "The death of tragedy is, like the death of love, one of these emotional fatalities as a result of which the human as distinguished from the natural world grows more and more a desert" (97). Man's belief in himself has suffered a petrification; Krutch provides evidence by portraying tragedy as a genre that has undergone an evolution from Religion to Art to Document. He notes that in its early stages tragedy was primarily a means of religious expression. The next phase sees the genre transformed into an aesthetic manifestation of man's struggle with the fundamental questions of his existence. Finally, he foresees, in the third stage, that tragedies will be read eventually as little more than documents describing the attitudes of a bygone age.

This movement from Religion to Art to Document also concerns George Steiner in *The Death of Tragedy*. Steiner's approach is much more 'literary' than that of Krutch. His theory stipulates that a number of cultural changes have led to the modern inability to write

or replicate tragedies in the manner of the Greeks or Shakespeare. Steiner's notion resembles Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence," when he suggests that modern writers are cognizant of their inability to create tragic texts of egual stature to those of Sophocles, Aeschylus, or the Elizabethans, and consequently opt for other genres. [2] Steiner is also an adherent of the oft-propounded theory that the creation of tragedy is only possible under certain specific (and ideal) conditions. He emphasizes the scarcity of tragic texts when he proclaims:

> In the long view, therefore, it is the existence of a living body of tragic drama, not the absence of it, that calls for particular note. The rise of the necessary talent to the possible occasion is rare. The material conditions of the theatre are rarely favourable to tragedy. Where the fusion of appropriate elements is realized, we do find more than the individual poet... But these constellations are splendid accidents. They are extremely difficult to account for. What we should expect, and actually find, are long spells of time during which no tragedies and, in fact, no drama of any serious pretensions is being produced. (107)

Steiner's theory of the death of tragedy requires the belief in the existence of a once vital tradition, a tradition he outlines by denoting specific periods in literary history such as Periclean Athens, Renaissance England, France from 1630 to 1690, or Germany from 1790 to 1840. [3] This tradition assumes an even greater vitality, however, when, in agreeing with Schiller, Steiner argues that we should not attempt to make any distinction between the works of Sophocles and Shakespeare. He claims that we can instinctively feel the bond that exists between the Greeks and the Renaissance playwright. He notes that one is able to intuit a "sense of relationship" between the two periods and concludes: "The intimations of a related spirit and ordering of human values are stronger than any sense of disparity" (192). Steiner intimates the existence of a tragic sense that was common to both the Greeks and Shakespeare but that has since vanished and consequently eluded the grasp of modern man.[4]

Steiner pursues the concept of the ideal conditions for tragedy when he points to the absence of a "controlling mythology" as a principal reason for the death of the genre (298). The decline of the tragic form is "inseparably related to the decline of the organic world view and of its attendant context of mythological, symbolic, and ritual reference" (292). He suggests that with the advent of liberalism and empirical thought such a context became impossible and was replaced by something entirely different:

> The myths which have prevailed since Descartes and Newton are myths of reason, no truer perhaps than those which precede them, but less responsive to the claims of art. Yet when it is torn loose from the moorings of myth, art tends toward anarchy. It becomes the outward leap of the impassioned but private imagination into a void of meaning. (321)

Steiner argues that verse best describes man's tragic condition, for it is a language that soars above the moorings of our pedestrian existence; however, prose has replaced verse and is the most appropriate means now available to the writer to present the isolated individual in a world devoid of universal significance:

> The epic of Russian national consciousness is *War and Peace*, not a poem in the heroic style. The chronicle of the modern soul's descent into hell is no *Divina Commedia*, but the prose fiction of Dostoevsky and Kafka. The natural language of statement, justification, and recorded experience is now prose. (309-10)

Steiner bemoans the fact that the novel no longer gives us characters who are able to grasp the significance of their existence or understand their place in the grand scheme of things. This is exemplified by the hero who is bereft of a language with which to express his condition adequately. Prose, since classical times, has been the language of the everyday, and verse was reserved for those moments when the artist wished to reveal the greatness that existed in man. It is with this propensity for prose, Steiner concludes, that the creation of tragedy becomes impossible for modern man.

Given such assumptions, Steiner is representative of a large number of critics who proclaim the death of tragedy, while concentrating on drama and ignoring the ability of any other form to express the tragic. In response to this predilection John Gassner states that critics are often guilty of the "genetic fallacy," whereby they assume that a genre must remain as it was at the time that it was created (407). Clayton Koelb similarly suggests that the meaning of the word "tragedy" has undergone various mutations throughout the ages. He states that if the word had a different meaning for Shakespeare than it did for the Greeks, then it surely has another for modern man. As Koelb notes, "The one sense in which George Steiner's thesis is correct is that the word itself no longer means what it used to: "tragedy" in Shakespeare's sense is dead" (262). Koelb points out the need for a certain degree of flexibility in making assumptions as to the form that tragedy must take. Gassner echoes this sentiment : "There is simply no single true philosophy of tragedy any more than there is a single inviolable tragic form. Tragic art is subject to evolutionary processes, and

tragedy created in modern times must be modern" (409). In fact, it is somewhat surprising that existing disagreements as to what constitutes tragic drama have not more often led to an acceptance of the novel as an appropriate tragic form. Various conclusions as to which of Shakespeare's plays are actually "tragedies" indicate the degree to which one should be flexible in applying any definition. [5]

David Lenson, in his *Achilles' Choice*, adopts an approach that is quite similar to Gassner's. Lenson's contention is that the criticism of tragedy has been plagued by a number of false assumptions. One of these assumptions is that drama is the form which best suits tragedy. Lenson makes the following point to counter that argument:

> It is a general rule that from the beginning tragedy tended to gravitate toward the literary and social centers of the times. It was so long allied with drama mainly because drama was the genre that satisfied this need. More practical factors, such as the desire of authors for economic survival, certainly enter into the picture. It should not be surprising to observe that tragedy followed the changes in generic predominance that took place in the eighteenth century, when drama was on the decline and the lyric and the novel on the ascendant. To neglect the application of centuries of criticism simply to protect a preconceived idea of genre is clearly wrong, particularly since that critical strain has long been part of the mainstream of literary thought. (5)

Lenson emphasizes the need for a degree of flexibility in making conclusions concerning tragic genre. While Steiner, for example, concedes that the novel now provides the best vehicle for modern man to express his plight, he remains blind to the manner in which the novel may function as a tragic form. The difficulty resides in the critic's inability to acknowledge the changes undergone within tragedy. The styles may differ considerably between Shakespeare and Dostoevsky, or Sophocles and Conrad, but this does not guarantee that each is unable to tap into the common tragic vein in his own particular idiom. Ion Omesco, in the introduction to *La métamorphose de la tragédie*, suggests that we have had our gaze fixed on the Greeks for so long that we have been blinded to the existence of subsequent tragic texts. The same conclusion can readily be applied to our study of Shakespeare. Omesco also notes the twentieth century has demonstrated a tendency to worship the roots of things: "The nostalgia for origins is the first of the idols that block the road towards a definition of tragedy" (21-2). [6] Mikhail Bakhtin, in *The Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, also warns against the propensity to construct such generic assumptions. He points to the paradoxical nature of genre:

> A literary genre, by its very nature, reflects the most stable, "eternal" tendencies in literature's development. Always preserved in a genre are undying elements of the *archaic*. True, these archaic elements are preserved in it only thanks to their constant *renewal*, which is to say, their contemporization. A genre is always the same and yet not the same, always old and new simultaneously. Genre is reborn and renewed at every new stage in the development of literature and in every individual work in a given genre. (106)

If mutability is a characteristic of genre, it is then conceivable that new definitions can, and indeed must, be created. In fact one may stipulate that the degree of mutability inherent in a genre may be a significant factor in determining its 'literary' survival. This is an idea which Lenson deals with at length in the opening chapters of his study on modern tragedy. He argues that classical terminology may still be applied to the modern text but the meanings of the terms have evolved somewhat. With the growth of individualism, the number of variations in determining possible conflicts exceeds our attempts at quantification. Lenson suggests we must remain conscious of the evolution of both the genre and the terms used to define it:

> ...in the tragedy of modern times a whole selection of orders is pitted against a plethora of anti-establishmentarian doctrines. In part, this is a healthy multiplicity resulting from the rise of individualism, in part it is an uncertainty that has brought about periods of brief and intense cataclysm separated by uneasy peacetimes. But it has become more and more difficult to differentiate personal and cultural contradictions. To be dislodged from order no longer requires a relish for Dionysian emotion. It may result entirely from the affirmative claims of rival orders. People bemoan the lack of heroes when in fact the problem is that there are too many different kinds. They say that the world lacks tragic possibilities when in fact there are so many that they have become pitfalls. In order to find modern tragedy, we must discard the notion of one central kind. We do not have a Dionysia or a Globe Theatre. We must settle for local dialectics with universal vibrations. This is nothing more than a response to the decentralization of ideology. (23)

In the confusion accompanying such ideological decentralization the novel has best succeeded in creating these "local dialectics with universal vibrations." The novel, given the scope for setting, description, and psychological realism unavailable to the dramatist, has the capacity to create a self-enclosed universe where specific actions may elicit their own tragic repercussions.

Following the works of Corneille and Racine, the appearances of tragic drama are rather infrequent. One might suggest, as does Richard Sewall, that the drama did not prove itself malleable enough to encompass the transformations taking place within the tragic vision. The novel thus emerges as the most adaptable vehicle to express this vision. It is not in the traditional Victorian novel, however, but in novels written by Russians and Americans that this metamorphosis first occurs. It is in the fiction of Melville, Hawthorne, and Dostoevsky, Sewall argues, that one finds "the closest approximation of the Greek and Elizabethan theaters" (85).

Though studies such as Murray Krieger's *The Tragic Vision* and Richard Sewall's *The Vision of Tragedy* indicate an increasing willingness to accept the novel as a tragic form in critical circles, no study has yet devoted itself to explaining why the novel has come to prevail as the dominant tragic, and literary, medium. Jeannette King, in *Tragedy in the Victorian Novel*, suggests that Eliot, James, and Hardy used the novel in the latter half of the nineteenth century as a means of confronting the modern's inability to express his plight and of expressing the ineffable. The task of the novelist became the expression of the modern condition in an original fashion, without entirely cutting the threads with earlier manifestations of the genre. Lenson suggests that a "migration through genres" occurred in literature as the artist searched for a means of expression in changing times (30). The novel, less controlled by literary antecedents than the drama, was more susceptible to the demands placed upon it by the tragic writer.

A thorough comparison of the drama with the novel, taking into account the latter's rise in contrast to the former's decline, would require far more space and time than this thesis allows. In studying a few significant traits of the novel, however, one can begin to grasp the reason it became the dominant form for expressing the tragic vision. For example, in her essay "Drama and Novel in Eighteenth-Century England," Laura S. Brown notes the inability of serious drama to adapt to social changes and demands. The primary reason for this inability is that drama finds itself obliged to observe a long-standing tradition while the novel is blessed with the freer rein of a younger form: "The prior evolution of the drama, unlike that of the novel, specifically incapacitates it for the successful embodiment of the bourgeois moral action" (290). In order to comprehend the consequent divergence of drama and the novel, it is necessary to evaluate the evolution of the drama prior to the appearance of the novel.

Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* is one of the few studies that attempts to grapple with the question of why the novel came to replace the drama as the dominant literary form. He is most useful in bridging the gap between the tragic theatre and the moment when the tragic novel makes its first appearance with *Le Rouge et le Noir*. Auerbach's interest lies in the "representation of reality in western literature" but many of his arguments have a direct bearing on the evolution of the tragic vision. He notes the growth of individualism and the loss of significance of Christian myths and points to the roles these changes come to play in the creation of what he terms "tragic realism." Though Auerbach does not provide a definition for "tragic realism," the term refers to tragedy that does not seek to exclude the realities of everyday existence and does not concentrate its attention on the favored few. In his chapter on Montaigne's *Essais*, for example, he points to those writings as the first instance of art clearly emphasizing the significance of man's existence on earth. Auerbach argues that it is in the *Essais* that "man's life - the random personal life as a whole - becomes problematic in the modern sense" (311). He notes that tragedy in the Middle Ages was subsumed in the "tragedy of Christ." It is only later, and Montaigne is the first indication of its approach, that we are able to experience the fate of a single person as tragic. As Auerbach notes: "...now the tragic appears as the highly personal tragedy of the individual, and moreover, compared with antiquity, as far less restricted by traditional ideas of the limits of fate, the cosmos, natural forces, political forms, and man's inner being" (311). In the end, however, Auerbach argues that Montaigne never broaches the tragic, simply because he seems unperturbed by the self-inquiry:

> He is too dispassionate, too unrhetorical, too ironic, and indeed too easy-going, if this term can be used in a dignified sense. He conceives himself too calmly, despite all his probing into his own insecurity. Whether this is a weakness or a strength is a question I shall not try to answer. In any case, this peculiar equilibrium of his being prevents the tragic, the possibility of which is inherent in his image of man, from coming to expression in his work. (311)

Thus Auerbach argues that Montaigne possesses all the qualities necessary to encapsulate a tragic vision, and yet some trait in his character prevents him from doing so. Montaigne is conscious of the instability of man's existence and yet, perhaps due to the ease with which he approaches the uncertainties of his own life, never expresses the tragedy inherent in such

a view of man. As Auerbach notes, whether this comes from shirking his ghosts or facing them remains difficult to determine.

It is with the arrival of Shakespeare, Auerbach argues, that tragic realism truly begins to take shape. If the individual is to acquire a significance great enough to be tragic, it must be underlined by the various contexts within which he lives his life. This is the principal reason, Auerbach points out, that Shakespeare and his contemporaries were averse to the use of an "isolating procedure," the detachment of the tragic action from its historical and social context, as in Greek tragedy. As Auerbach states: "This isolating procedure, which is to be explained through the religious, mythological, and technical premises of the antique theater, is out of keeping with the concept of a magical and polyphonic cosmic coherence which arose during the Renaissance" (322). Shakespeare's tragic universe is populated by both high and low figures, creatural realism, and a definite mixture of styles ranging from colloquial diction to elevated speech. His plays thus attempt to represent an unlimited world open to numerous variations. It is a world clearly lacking stability and often troubled and shaken by unseen and unknown elements. As Auerbach states: "There is no stable world as background, but a world which is perpetually reengendering itself out of the most varied forces" (324). It is precisely in such a world that we shall later encounter the heroes of Melville, Dostoevsky, and Faulkner.

However, the free scope exercised by Shakespeare in the expression of the tragic is not pursued by his followers. In fact, an opposing impulse soon gains credence. Auerbach notes that:

> Protestantism and the Counter Reformation, absolutistic ordering of society and intellectual life, academic and puristic imitation of antiquity, rationalism and scientific empiricism, all operated together to prevent Shakespeare's freedom in the tragic from continuing to develop after him. (324)

Auerbach is extreme in his "isolation" of Shakespeare, in making the dramatist an anomaly, cutting him off as he does from both ancestors and his successors, and not seeing him as a product of the Renaissance. His explanation, however, is one of the few rendered to explain the disappearance of tragedy for nearly two hundred years. [7]

The next instance of a tragic strain of literature is that of French classicism - one which most clearly demonstrates the retrograde impulses referred to by Auerbach. Taking antique tragedy as its model, French classicism employed the "isolating procedure" to the highest

degree. As Auerbach points out, citing Racinian tragedy as the most significant example, the hero experiences nothing below the sublime. He has no contact with anything or anyone that would taint his being. He is detached from any historical or social context - he is responsible only unto himself, to such a degree that the sun itself seems to revolve around his personage. As Auerbach notes: "...the most impressive stylistic effects...are those in which whole countries, or even the universe appear as spectator, witness, background, or echo of the princely emotion" (374-5). The hero thus remains isolated, affected only by people and actions existing within his own sphere. Auerbach compares this method to a scientific experiment which seeks to create the ideal conditions under which to study the various manifestations of its components: "the phenomenon is observed with no disturbing factors and in unbroken continuity" (382). Auerbach seeks to emphasize the "unrealistic" qualities of French classicism. By strict observation of the rules of unity, and by separating the hero from any social or even physical reality, Racinian tragedy creates a specific atmosphere that cannot be repeated anywhere outside the court of Louis XIV. Acknowledging that his is a modern reading and that these tragedies were appreciated from an entirely different perspective, Auerbach nonetheless openly questions the stylistic qualities of French classicism:

> Is it reasonable and natural to exalt human beings in so extreme a fashion and to make them speak in so extremely stylized a language? Is it possible that crises mature in so short a time and with so little disturbance; and can we admit as probable that all their momentous phases shall occur in one room? The impartial observer, that is, anyone who has not grown up with these masterpieces from childhood and early school days, so that he accepts even their most astonishing peculiarities as a matter of course, will answer in the negative. (388)

Thus, for Auerbach at least, late seventeenth century drama had reached an impasse of sorts; it had attained stylistic perfection, but one which left little room for improvisation.

In fact, he suggests that the next instance of tragic realism does not occur in drama but in the novel, and not until Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir*, published in 1830. In Auerbach's view, the drama had not benefitted from Shakespeare's example. It was an art form trapped within its own conventions unable to adapt to changing times. Auerbach argues the demands of tragic realism required that writers adjust to their changing cultural environment. The novel, particularly in the hands of writers such as Stendhal and Balzac, proved itself to be the vehicle best suited to these demands (481). When Steiner indicates

that the number of occasions in which the tragic has arisen are few, he fails to grasp that in every revival of the tragic, a new system of expression is required in order to address a temporally new reality, although tragedy itself remains unchanged. By the mid-nineteenth century, the novel was clearly the vehicle through which this evolution was taking place.[7] The transformation from a feudal to a bourgeois society destroyed the social context within which highness of rank could be equated with greatness of passion. In consequence, the novel is the first literary form to deal seriously with aspects of non-aristocratic life.

In *Tragic Realism and Modern Society* , John Orr argues that this transformation caused a period of re-adjustment during which tragedy was virtually non-existent. He suggests, as does Sewall, that for the first hundred years of the novel there existed no tragic realism but only "serious fiction." He makes a distinction between serious fiction (Balzac, Dickens, Eliot) and, borrowing Auerbach's term, tragic realism (Tolstoy, Dostoevsky). Serious fiction concentrates on social problems and their effects on human relationships, whereas Orr notes that:

> ...tragic realism goes one step further by portraying the irreparable loss of the human qualities either actual or possible in the lives of its characters. Yet it operates, unlike Shakespearean or Racinian tragedy, with a guiding idea of history and society. Its greater proximity, in content, to contemporary social life, is at once a liberation and a constraint. (12)

Thus the novel, in Orr's view, is able to convey a sense of realism through its observation of the social and historical character of its day. The novelist, unlike the dramatist, "cannot create tragedy out of myth but must find it within reality itself. More or less contemporary with the world it reveals, tragic realism expresses without any form of social exclusion the conflicts and contradictions of that same world" (12). Thus the mixture of low and sublime styles, the increased social scope, and the observation of contemporary details are all means employed by the novelist to compensate for the absence of tragic myth in the novel. In the place of a mythical backdrop, the novelist undertakes to create a self-enclosed universe where the specific action may carry tragic repercussions within its own particular world, and yet reflect our own.

Orr's implied connection between the tragic vision and literary realism must be stressed. The greater the degree to which one feels the action depicted to be real and genuine, the greater the likelihood of one's deriving the maximum tragic effect. The drama benefits from a sense of immediacy that continually eludes the novel. The very presence of a narrator, the

reader's awareness that the events have occurred in the past (the tale is already a completed action before the narrator undertakes to tell it), and the fact that we are aware of the author's existence as a controlling consciousness, all lead to a feeling of distance separating us from the represented action. Drama has always existed as public performance while the novel's domain is the private world of the reader. Unlike the theatre, the novel is unable to rely on the physical presence of its dramatis personae to convey a sense of realism to its readers. It must conjure up its world and the figures that populate it in the imagination of its audience - thus, it often finds itself dependent on contemporary reality.

To replace this lack of immediacy, the modern novelist often resorts to a greater sense of intimacy. Techniques such as stream-of-consciousness also tend to give the reader a more "realistic" sense of the workings of a character's mind than does blank verse. The presence of the narrator can serve to create a bond, rather than create a gap, between the reader and the tale, for they are involved in a similar activity. (This issue will be covered in depth in the third chapter, dealing with the choric figure in modern tragic literature.) The use of multiple point of view (in *As I Lay Dying* or *The Waves*, for example) also serves to endow the novel with a greater sense of objectivity and polyphonic quality than is found in the dramatic form. The characteristic which perhaps serves the novel best in its depiction of modern tragedy, however, is its very lack of stylistic constraints, its limitless number of subjects, and the very sense of indefinition that resides at its core. That an intimation of mystery and inconclusiveness are part of the tragic sense of life is indisputable. Thus, there appears to be an inherent compatibility between the nature of the modern novel and the expression of the tragic vision.

Aldous Huxley, however, in his essay "Tragedy and the Whole Truth," argues that modernism often rejects tragedy as a form that may yield a realistic view of our existence. Huxley claims that tragedy presents an image of completeness - a false image created for the sake of aesthetic unity. He insists that the "chemical purity" of tragedy requires that particular elements be excluded in order to maintain the tragic effect: "For the fact is that tragedy and what I have called the Whole Truth are not compatible; where one is the other is not. There are certain things which even the best, even Shakespearean tragedy, cannot absorb into itself" (80). Rather than present the limited perspective of the tragic, Huxley argues, the modern writer attempts to create a work containing every possible thing. The goal becomes to portray the Whole Truth rather than the false completeness of tragedy:

> In recent times literature has become more and more acutely conscious of the Whole Truth - of the great oceans of irrelevant things, events, and thoughts stretching endlessly away in every direction from whatever island point (a character, a story) the author may choose to contemplate. To impose the kind of arbitrary limitations, which must be imposed by anyone who wants to write tragedy, has become more and more difficult - is now indeed, for those who are at all sensitive to contemporaneity, almost impossible. (81)

Huxley suggests that the modern writer refuses to be confined to the strict structure that tragedy requires, and that this depiction of contemporary society from all angles is ultimately incompatible with the tragic vision.

This argument ignores the sense of mystery that is an inherent part of the tragic form. For Huxley's case relies on perceiving tragedy as an explanatory, rather than exploratory, form; a view which is contingent on one's interpreting the cathartic moment, in response to the tragic action, as final and conclusive. One of the critical misconceptions from which Huxley's analysis suffers finds its roots in eighteenth century rational morality and its consequent influence on critical theory. The concepts that the hero should possess a tragic flaw and that the ending should demonstrate some form of "poetic justice" arose at this time.[9] These notions have long been outdated and modified, but their influence has proven tenacious. For example, it has led to the widely accepted belief that the audience must necessarily "learn" something from tragedy; in this belief the notions of affirmation and redemption find their source. There is also the tendency to make certain demands of the hero in order that the play contain a "satisfactory" ending; that he be aware of his fate, for example, and that he arrive at some realization as to why matters have turned out as they have. [10] Ultimately, these contingencies provide the means of avoiding the dark truths revealed to us in the tragic form, for they rationalize the mystery that lies at the heart of every tragedy. Raymond Williams explains the effects of such moral demands upon literature and the ensuing philosophical backlash:

> ...what was intended as a moral emphasis, of a quite traditional kind, became an ideology, to be imposed on experience and to mask the more difficult recognitions of actual living. That the scheme should have been called 'poetic justice' is, ironically, the demonstration of this ideological character. This version of consequence might be demonstrated in a fiction, but could not negotiate much actual experience. The distance between such fiction and experience was then the main fact that men came to observe,

> and the consciousness of unexplained and apparently irrational suffering provided the basis for the eventual overthrow not only of this version of consequence but of its whole moral emphasis.(31-2)

It is now accepted that tragedy does not, by necessity, provide its audience with answers and therefore may be conceived in a much more open-ended fashion. For example, Norman Berlin, in his study *The Secret Cause*, points to the "interrogative mode" as the thread that ties the various forms of tragedy together. [11] If we are able to accept this stipulation, we shall begin to observe that the nature of dramatic tragedy and that of its novelistic counterpart are not as distinct as Huxley would have us believe. Berlin suggests that modern literature all too often leans towards declarations (social, political, or otherwise) and as such strays away from the interrogative mode. Tragedy's role is to affirm the existence of a higher plane, to suggest that there are some hidden answers, some "secret cause," to those questions which remain unanswered in the literary text, whether the text is written by Sophocles or Faulkner. What must be dramatized is the inevitable end that man faces, that he does not know why things are the way they are, and furthermore, that he shall never know, no matter his efforts. Berlin expresses this notion in the following fashion:

> ...whereas religion offers answers to the mystery, whereas science strives to comprehend portions of the mystery, tragedy enhances the mystery by dramatizing the question. Religion leads to a period, science leads to a comma, tragedy raises a question mark. (2)

Tragedy concerns itself with those questions that remain a perpetual part of man's existence. At its roots it is interested in man in his most elemental and primal condition. Richard Sewall makes a point similar to Berlin's when he notes that tragedy "sees man as questioner, naked, unaccommodated, alone, facing mysterious, demonic forces in his own nature and outside, and the irreducible facts of suffering and death" (5). As a number of critics have pointed out, this is the primary role of the tragic agent: to act as questioner, to search for the reasons our existence is the way it is. To question, knowing there is no answer, is the fate of the tragic agent. One need only think of Lear's "Is man no more than this?" (*King Lear* III, iv, l.106) or Ahab's "Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, or God, or who, that lifts this arm?" (*Moby Dick*, 508) to see the role the question plays at the heart of tragedy. Tragedy is thus intrinsically interrogative in attempting to portray the general inconclusiveness of our existence. It becomes obvious then that the formalistic sense of completeness in tragedy

differs dramatically from Huxley's exclusive sense of tragedy as the manifestation of a spiritual or epistemological completeness.

There is, of course, an aspect of hope embodied in the act of questioning, for it signifies man's perpetuating the search for truth. If Oedipus and Lear search for answers to their questions, they ask in the hope that the reply will be a positive one. They anticipate, like many tragic heroes, that the answers will somehow make man's existence a redeemable, or at least bearable, one. The knowledge gained in response to these questions tends to concern itself with, or embody, a reality of its own; an informed and usually newly-discovered horrific understanding of the individual's self and his immediate condition (ie. his limitations). Hamlet's self-castigations at Ophelia's grave, Lear's upon the heath, or Ivan's conversations with the Devil and Smerdyakov, are this and much more. It is to the illusion of strength that the individual most often falls victim, either a strength he already possesses or one that he feels he may soon gain. For "knowledge" in tragedy is often the realization on the part of the hero that he was foolish to hope for anything other than the existence he was given. The hero suffers in consequence of his attempts to change his condition, and whatever knowledge he gains is all that stands between us and the same abyss.

Support for Berlin's interpreting tragedy as an interrogative genre can be found in Stephen Booth's *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition and Tragedy*. Booth suggests that the great tragedies, such as *King Lear*, are great precisely because they present the world as incomplete. Tragedy presents itself as a whole, conscious of its falsification of life (as Mandel calls it),[12] in order to point to a larger whole that exists beyond it. Booth concludes that the act of defining tragedy is a paradoxical activity, for by using the word "tragedy" we are attempting to place limits on an essentially limitless entity.[13] Thus, using Booth's terms, the very act of defining can be perceived as one possessing cathartic qualities:

> We use the word *tragedy* when we are confronted with a sudden invasion of our finite consciousness by the fact of infinite possibility - when our minds are sites for a domestic collision of the understanding and the fact of infinity. *Tragedy* is the word by which the mind designates (and thus in part denies) its helplessness before a concrete, particular, and thus undeniable demonstration of the limits of human understanding. (85)

Booth's conclusions suggest that the artist, the characters, as well as the reader, are all engaged in a comparable activity: the search for relief or hope, or a sense of affirmation, that

can be gained from the events played out in the text. The enterprise extends beyond the author to his audience, whose consequent interpretations of the events can implicate them in a cathartic reality of their own.

Murray Krieger proposes a formula akin to Booth's when he argues that we must distinguish between tragedy, the literary form, and the tragic vision. He sees tragedy as the means utilized by the artist to put aesthetic reins upon the chaotic aspects of his vision. Krieger speaks of the effect of the "aesthetic rounded whole" which serves to reassure the audience about the glimpse it has been given of a desperate world:

> This roundedness, this completeness, carrying 'aesthetic distance' with it as it brings us the assurances of form, presents us its formal order as a token, a security - something given in hand- to guarantee the cosmic order beyond the turbulence it has conquered. Thus it is that the cathartic principle *is* ultimately a purely formalistic one, even as tragedy, despite its foreboding rumblings, can remain a force for affirmation through its formal powers alone. (Tragic, 4)

Krieger's argument parallels Booth's; he portrays tragedy as a formalistic means of offering relief from the darker side of our lives. By emphasizing the interrogative approach to tragedy, the whole truth is no longer an issue. For tragedy need no longer be seen, or expected, to make conclusive and exclusive statements. Laurence Michel echoes this sentiment when he bemoans our continual attempts to make tragedy tell us too much:

> To do tragedy justice, then, and to benefit most from its mysterious healing properties, we should resist the impulse to hanker, to adulterate, to gloss. We should, it seems to me, resist, as Marlowe did in withholding from Faustus the saving qualification of his damnable syllogism, the urge to play the trump card of faith. (Thing, 35)

This interrogative sense of tragedy illuminates one of the major paradoxes of the genre: while the tragic text portrays or suggests an image of formal completeness, its vision serves to underline the incompleteness of our existence that lies just outside the text. This paradox lies at the very heart of the element we refer to as affirmation, an element which many regard as essential in the creation of tragedy. When Krieger suggests the form of the work itself can have a cathartic effect on the audience or the reader, he is of course referring to the fact that we can derive some benefit from the desperate moments played out before us. The text can point to something beyond the tragic action; despite the end which the work seemingly presents, it is able to project a sense of continued, perhaps wiser, existence following the

tragic loss. Thus the tragic text is seen not as a falsification of life but rather as an acknowledgement of life's complexity and the limited ability of language to convey that complexity. [14] Stephen Booth, in his discussion of *King Lear*, argues that the language of the play can create the impression of knowing that the Truth exists without ever being able to clearly state what that truth is:

> Although I insist that Lear learns nothing in the course of the play and that *King Lear* has nothing to teach us, I also insist that the sense that Lear learns and that the play illuminates is *of* the play - is generated by *King Lear*, not foisted upon it by the benignly creative commentators who insist on telling us *what* Lear learns and *what* the great human truths are that *King Lear* so evidently makes evident. The fact that we find *Lear* "meaningful" leads us to try and identify the meanings that fill it. The fact that we cannot find the meaning or meanings we seek does not, however, deny the fact that sends us questing: *King Lear* feels profoundly illuminating. The play does not reveal the true nature of things, but it does - or seems to - prove that nature can *be* revealed and is contained within *King Lear*, a play whose glow assures us that within its humanly manageable compass is the light by which to see the essential truth of the human condition. An audience to *King Lear* does not see the light but knows itself to be where the light is. (162)

Booth's logic leads him towards the paradox of temporary hope that exists within and outside of the tragic text. Both the characters in the work, and the audience without, struggle with the situations presented in the hope that they shall gain some deeper insight into their condition. Despite the fact that no answers are revealed, the creation of the tragic form nourishes the hope that they can be. The hope that this revelation will be accomplished comes to reside in the figure of the tragic hero. We know how things are but we do not know why things are the way they are - our hope is that someone will discover those answers for us.

The modern novel is often labelled tragic without the least explanation, as though the statement was self-evident. How often have we read of Hemingway's "tragic vision" or Camus's "tragic view of life," for example. Yet there exists a generic reluctance to embrace the novel as a form capable of tragedy. This chapter has attempted to concretize changing attitudes towards the functions of the tragic vision (ie. tragic realism) and the manner in which these have come to be represented in the novel. If we accept the notion that tragedy can move beyond the conventional ending (if we read the final scenes of *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* as anything but final), we can

begin to grasp the quality that makes modern tragedy different, and yet fundamentally similar, to its classical counterpart. The novel is now the literary form best equipped to portray the ambiguities of modern life. As it searches for relative and comprehensive versions of truth it continually confronts tragic reality and is faced with the challenge of containing it within its formal barriers, a challenge taken up by the authors in this study. The next chapter will deal with the hero, the changes this figure has undergone in the twentieth century, and how the modern tragedian has responded to this metamorphosis.

Endnotes

1. For a number of existing definitions of tragedy see Mandel (20), Kaufmann (85), Brereton (20), Michel (12), Frye (37), or Krook (10). For theories discounting the possibility of a reliable definition, see Omesco's introduction, or T.R.Henn, who notes: "There neither is nor can be any definition of tragedy that is sufficiently wide to cover its variant forms in the history of world literature" (282).

2. See Steiner (17, 38).

3. For an opposing view of this concept of ideal conditions see Gassner (408).

4. For a contrast to this approach see Boas, who states: "Names of literary *genres* are but tags for works of art which have certain historical relations, but there is no more reason to believe that *Hamlet* and the *Eumenides* have a common essence than there is to insist that Louis Capet and Louis Phillipe have a common essence, or that the Lever Building in New York and Lincoln's log cabin have a common essence" (117).

5. One critic, Ekbert Faas, for example, describes *King Lear* as "anti-tragic." Faas's distinctions are often blurred and his definition of tragedy too confining. For instance, in his comparison of tragedy to "anti-tragedy" and "post-tragedy," Faas notes: "While tragedy, then, is basically explanatory, anti- and post-tragedy are exploratory. Instead of arranging events in a progressively conceived unity, with beginning, middle, and end, initial complication, climax, and resolution, they show that things are basically unpredictable, repetitive, unfathomable - in short, independent of human meaning. Their forms abound with loose ends, digressions, broken-backed structures, and false solutions" (7). Faas

attempts to create three forms in the place of one. In so doing he robs tragedy of its essentially interrogatory nature. By reducing tragedy to a form that minimalizes its significance, Faas is able to claim that *Lear* is not a tragedy. His study merely demonstrates that the boundaries of tragedy are not as distinct in their nature as one may wish to believe. For example, Geoffrey Brereton, in his *Principles of Tragedy*, chooses four major plays, *Oedipus*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Phèdre*, to demonstrate how each play varies considerably from the next and yet, in terms of literary tradition, are all considered to be tragedies.

6. "La nostalgie des origines est la première des idoles qui nous barrent la route vers une définition de la tragédie."

7. See also Sewall's *The Vision of Tragedy*, Chapter 8.

8. A similar argument is put forward by Laura Brown in her article on the literature of eighteenth century England. She suggests that the nature of Restoration theatre, in the form of the heroic play and the comedy of manners, serves to "establish a set of conventions that later comes to restrict the generic capacity of the drama." (291) She cites as an example the experimental comedies of Congreve, such as *Double Dealer* and *The Way of the World*, and notes the disapproval of his audiences, who "objected to the subtlety of the characterization" (295). Tradition imposes certain restrictions on the drama from which it is unable, for any number of reasons, to shake itself loose. Brown notes that the failures in eighteenth century drama are often due to attempts by the playwright to make his vision acquiesce to the requirements of the genre:

> The inconsistencies in Lillo's and Rowe's plays, like the irrelevance in Addison's and Steele's, are a consequence of the exigencies of the dramatic moral action. All of these writers are struggling with the confined context and flat characterizations bequeathed to them by their evolutionary intimacy with the social drama of the Restoration. (297)

In contrast to the drama, Brown points out, the novel has as its ancestry a rather discontinuous history of prose narrative. The influences on Richardson, Defoe, and Fielding are diffuse and often dissimilar in nature. Thus we can see that the very nature of the novel, in its apparent freedom from any limitations and its seemingly ephemeral boundaries, allowed it to become the dominant literary form.

9. One need only recall Samuel Johnson's inability to endure the final scenes of *King Lear* or Othello's murder of Desdemona, or Nahum Tate's cheerful revisions of Shakespeare in the late seventeenth century to witness man's avoidance of tragedy's darker truths, see Kaufmann (68).

10. Mandel states that "one of the tendencies of our nature is to complete what is incomplete, and therefore the voice still comes to the suffering hero, making his life, if not happy, at least intelligible." (154)

11. His title is taken from Joyce's A *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* where Stephen Dedalus presents his own definition of pity and terror. The passage is worth quoting:

> Pity is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the human sufferer. Terror is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the secret cause. (204)

Also, for a connection between the novel and the interogative mode see Kurrik who states: "Between the time of Johnson's *Rasselas* and *The Brothers Karamazov* the novel's tolerance for the unknown (which Johnson feared so absolutely) grew immensely, as is evidenced by its daring to be fundamentally more and more interrogatory" (187).

12. See Mandel: "With recognition, we see once more how art may transform and beautifully falsify life." (153)

13. See Booth: "Theories of the nature of tragedy are more important to us than theories of the nature of other things because theories of tragedy keep us from facing the thing itself." (84)

14. Many critics have isolated *King Lear* as an ideal example of this paradox. A.C. Bradley suggests a sense of affirmation is external to the action of the play, and that any attempt to locate affirmation within the text (either in the words or actions of one particular figure) runs the risk of effacing the tragic sense altogether. This reading of tragedy, Bradley concludes:

> ...implies that the tragic world, if taken as it is presented, with all its error, guilt, failure, woe and waste, is no final reality, but only part of reality taken for a whole, and, when so taken, illusive; and that if we could see the whole, and the tragic facts in their true place in it, we should find them, not abolished, of course, but so transmuted that they had ceased to be strictly tragic... (271)

An essential component of the tragic work is the fact that the "final reality" remains a mystery - and here we have returned to the subject of man as questioner. Man's role remains as such precisely for the reasons that Bradley has pointed out: that the individual is unable to perceive the whole yet is forced to accept reality as the small part that is his own. Thus, in the tragic work, there must always exist the sense of a distance separating the knowledge gained by the hero and/or the audience and the knowledge that is glimpsed but never fully presented. In essence the tragic work is temporarily perceived as a whole within the unseen and ineffable Whole.

CHAPTER TWO: HEROIC BLINDNESS

If we accept that the novel can convey the tragic vision, we must also realize that the role of the hero in tragedy has undergone some fundamental changes. The narrative form of the novel dictates that the hero can no longer act as mediating consciousness between the tale and its audience. Our modern sensibilities have grown skeptical at the thought of a hero comprehending his every thought and action. Modernism has rebelled against the creation of any structured form that would endow life with a sense of coherence and definition it did not otherwise possess. The hero thus can no longer be perceived as the envelope containing all the elements of the unfolding tragedy. We can no longer expect to find a Hamlet at the center of the work who will act as a controlling consciousness. It appears self-evident to proclaim that the hero in the twentieth century is not one graced with the same indivisible spirit as his classical counterpart. The majority of Shakespeare's tragic heroes arrive at conclusions that mirror the imperfection of their state and in the process allow the existence of something greater to be known. Though both Lear and Othello are forced to pay the ultimate price for their mistakes, it is not before realizing that they have "loved not wisely but too well." The modern tragic hero is rarely accorded such illumination. In fact, the struggle in modern tragedy often revolves around the hero's inability to know himself. Ian Watt, for example, debates whether we can rightfully hold the hero responsible for not achieving self-knowledge:

> ...the question therefore arises whether [the tragic hero], or anyone else, should be judged and found wanting by standards derived from the unsupported modern dogmas that full self-knowledge is possible and that it can deliver us from the ignominious fate of being what we are. (Ending, 4)

Watt insists we must not perceive the hero's self-recognition as a requirement of tragedy. Such demands would bind the hero to god-like actions and to outdated concepts of affirmation. The hero now serves to awaken in others the recognition that so often eludes him and, in the process, usually brings about his own destruction.

The individual exists in isolation because the disintegrating communal structure is no longer able to reconcile the conflicting components within it. The hero in turn is unable to align his cause with those of the community. The pursuit of his goal, in fact, frequently poses a direct threat to the communal fabric.[1] Richard Sewall suggests the dilemma facing the modern tragic hero often involves the realization that the necessity for action will indubitably invoke the anger of the community and of forces outside the hero's comprehension:

> Gone is the clear purpose, for right or wrong, of Antigone and Oedipus, Dr.Faustus and Ahab. Even Hamlet, for all his hesitations and doubts, had a Hyperion to judge a satyr by; and in her dark forest, Hester Prynne never lost her sense of justification. The modern tragic problem is not what values or loyalties to choose but the bankruptcy of all values and loyalties, and the consequent disintegration of the individual. (108)

The individual is left to his own devices, searching within the depths of his own soul for answers to the puzzling questions of his existence. He has nothing to measure his responses against. Encountering a moral void, he is blinded to the possible repercussions his actions may engender outside of himself. This is reflected in Stein's notion of the "destructive element," in *Lord Jim*, where the hero submerges himself in, and attempts to forge an ideal existence out of, those elements that will eventually destroy him. The destruction of the hero is carried out, however, not maliciously, but impersonally, as though the destructive forces were indifferent to his existence. In discussing the condition of the modern tragic hero, Sewall concludes:

> The only hope for man in his new state of spiritual anarchy is to follow out his nature wherever it leads; he must test his new freedom to the limit. The measure of the new hero is his capacity for sensing the problem, the dynamic of his searching it out (the risks and the suffering), and the awareness of partial truths gained. This new tragic hero has not the satisfaction of a clear and present opponent - an unjust deity, a plague-stricken city, ungrateful daughters, an oppressive social and religious code, or a Moby Dick. He struggles not so much with a crisis as with a condition; and the condition is the contemporary confusion of values and the dilemma in his own soul. (110)

The hero is conscious of his struggle but remains unable to clearly define his antagonist. These unknown Forces, as the framing laws of nature of human life, invest all action with

meaning, yet refuse to divulge any rules, refuse to be manifest at all, and so leave us to act in a vacuum, to discover the sense of our lives in this void - where, finally, no meaning is possible. Modern tragedy thus embodies the recognition that it is ultimately impossible to find any certainty in our lives, but portrays man as the creature who attempts to do so in the face of that fact, and whose very attempt gives his life meaning.

Like classical tragedy, modern tragedy reflects whatever humanity feels to be illogical and irrational about its existence. However, the previous belief that some coherence could be foisted upon this universe has long disappeared, and the malleable nature of the novel has proven the ideal tool for expressing this despair. With the increasing doubt inherent in the upheaval of religious and social systems, the hero cannot embody those certainties we wish to maintain about the world around us. Instead, he often personifies the inabilities modern man experiences in making sense of his condition. Thus, the hero's struggle in this world is one couched in uncertainty, as Sewall describes:

> He does not shape events in bold strokes; rather, events to a great extent shape him. His characteristic state is indecisiveness, amounting, in his initial phase, to paralysis of will; and hence the tendency to call him pathetic rather than tragic, a victim rather than a hero. But to the extent to which he senses the dilemma and its full implications, takes positive action of whatever sort, follows it to the end (accepting the consequences in suffering and loss) and in so doing gains insight into his own being and the human condition, he is still tragic, and a hero. (110)

The modern hero, conscious of the futility of his actions, still struggles to uncover *any* certainty about the world around him. What is now lost in the tragic effort is no longer the dream of self-realization, but a dream of knowledge. It is with this dream, this quest, that we, as modern readers, most readily identify. [2]

Modern man has come to perceive his fellow man as incapable of great deeds or god-like majesty. The hero has become increasingly individualized, with each motive containing its own personal significance. It is thus doubly necessary for the author to emphasize the common bonds which the hero shares with all of us. [3] It is easy to distinguish the hero; it is a different matter to give him qualities to which we can all relate and with which we can sympathize. The hero is no longer directly related to the gods (or an idealized vision of man): rather he tends to embody a value that we cherish as significant to our existence.

Now, with few certainties upon which to base his existence, the modern hero often invests his faith and energy in a truth he has managed to uncover. The domineering doubt which haunts the hero often pushes him to illusory absolutes. It is when he adopts this absolute that the hero embarks upon the road to his destruction. [4]

Paradoxically, it is in the very act of pursuing this absolute that the hero achieves a form of affirmation. The existence of this singular truth implies the presence of an unseen, higher totality of truths. With the growth of moral meaninglessness in the world around him, in an expanding void of irrational and illogical occurrences, the hero is forced to turn inwards to find answers to his queries. The adoption of an "ethical absolute," as Krieger describes it, is one of the means at his disposal. The danger resides in the hero's self-absorption within this absolute (a danger that both Ivan Karamazov and Kurtz realize far too late). It is the hero's intensity of purpose that carries him to this point of no return, one which the moderate man would and must surely forsake.

We no longer require the hero to perform the same functions as his classical counterpart, because the expectations we harbor have dramatically changed. There is a modern reluctance to allow the hero to experience, or at least voice, any recognition. Although classical tragedy would be inconceivable with a tragic agent who does not at least have an inkling of the consequences of his actions, that the hero *not* achieve complete insight into his situation remains a requirement of the genre, as Krook explains:

> The point to stress, however, which is true of all tragedy (and comedy, too, for that matter), is that there is always an irreducible gap between what may be conceived of as the perfect and complete (ideal) insight into the representative situation of the tragic hero and the imperfect, incomplete insight actually attained by the hero, even the most intelligent, sensitive, self-conscious, and self-critical; and that this gap *must* exist if there is to be a tragic story to tell. (Krook, 46) [5]

Keeping this paradox in mind, it is obvious that some other response is needed if the tragic vision is to be maintained. The knowledge that was once the sole possession of the hero now seldom comes to illuminate his existence - that knowledge *must* come to another. Thus, the hero in the modern novel poses some particular problems in relation to tragedy. His fate remains representative of the human condition, yet he does not embody the tragedy "whole" within him. His blindness is made evident in the narrative of another who attempts

to make sense of his plight. The quest for certainty, the dream of knowledge, is the element that binds hero, chorus/ choric figure, tragedian, and reader together. The analysis of the novels that follows attempts to show how this quest is divided amongst all parties.

Published in 1851, Melville's *Moby Dick* stands on the cusp between the classical novel and its modern counterpart. It borrows frequently, and unabashedly, from other genres: the drama, the scientific journal, the travel narrative, the dictionary, and the encyclopedia. There is little doubt, however, that in writing *Moby Dick* Melville set out to create a "novel-tragedy." The echoes of Shakespeare sprinkled liberally throughout the book, the use of dramatic conventions (soliloquies and asides, for example), and the very fact that Ishmael labels himself a "tragic dramatist" at the end of chapter 33, are all elements that serve to connect the novel with earlier examples of the tragic. While clearly borrowing from its 'tragic' predecessors, the novel also anticipates the modernism of the twentieth century. We are overwhelmed by the material provided us, and are forced to search, much like the hero and the choric observer, for the ineffable center that continually eludes us. Using such a technique, Melville demands our total involvement, with Ishmael's aid, in the completion of the tragic cycle.

If we are to discuss *Moby Dick* as a novel-tragedy, however, the novel's protagonist must be considered tragic. Captain Ahab, for all his single-mindedness, is a study in complexity. Kerry McSweeney, for example, sees Ahab as the unusual component in Melville's 'epic', for he is a hero who "is neither successful nor predominantly sympathetic" (59). At an early point in the novel, Ishmael, as narrator and Melville's mouthpiece, recognizes that he is faced with a conceptual problem. He confesses the subject of his narrative is not the life of an emperor or a king. Rather, his tale concerns itself with the adventures of "a poor old whale hunter," and, "therefore all outward majestical trappings and housings are denied me" (145). This is also Melville's struggle - how to create a tragic hero out of an unsympathetic, and superficially unexceptional man. The author's response to this challenge is both a hero and a novel that bridge the gap between old conceptions of tragedy and its modern strain.

Despite his obvious shortcomings, Ahab's presence clearly dominates the novel. His appearance is anticipated from the moment we first hear his name as Captain Peleg describes

him to Ishmael. Peleg suggests it is the combination of certain elements, from Quaker ancestry and a life at sea, that has contributed to create men such as Ahab:

> ...when these things unite in a man of greatly superior natural force, with a globular brain and a ponderous heart; who has also by the stillness and seclusion of many long night-watches in the remotest waters, and beneath constellations never seen here at the north, been led to think untraditionally and independently; receiving all nature's sweet or savage impressions fresh from her own virgin voluntary and confiding breast, and thereby chiefly, but with some help from accidental advantages, to learn a bold and nervous lofty language - that man makes one in a whole nation's census - a mighty pageant creature, formed for noble tragedies. (73)

The "globular brain" and the "ponderous heart", the "bold and nervous lofty language," are all characteristics that contribute to make Ahab tragic, and that serve to recall Shakespeare's dark men, most notably Lear and Macbeth. The manner in which he rages at the elements, would strike the sun if it insulted him, is strongly reminiscent of Lear upon the heath. His interaction with Pip also serves to echo Lear's relationship with his Fool. And Ahab's ties to Fedallah and his over-confidence in the Parsee's predictions are obvious allusions to Macbeth's affiliations with the supernatural.

But it is primarily in his use of language that Ahab most resembles the Thane of Cawdor. In articulating his condition man is at his most tragic, for it is in those moments that he most clearly distinguishes himself from the mute animals of this earth. Unlike the speechless whale's head in chapter 80 who "hast seen enough to split the planets and make an infidel of Abraham, and not one syllable is thine!" (311), Ahab has his "nervous and lofty language" through which to rail against the universe and express his condition. As David Lenson notes: "In the splendor of his language, especially in the moments of clarity when he sees his monomania with the detachment of an outsider, there is nearly enough strength to counteract whatever ethical judgments may be made against him" (62). Language is the element that allows Ishmael's portrayal of Ahab to overcome the hero's lack of "all outward majestical trappings and housings." Paradoxically, Ahab's language also serves to reveal the acute limitations that assail man in his attempts to express his plight. It also intimates the presence of a reality beyond man's comprehension, in which language is the only tool available to make the whole apprehendable.

Ishmael, however, points out that language is not the only external manifestation of Ahab's character. Ahab's philosophy is dominated by an emphasis on the dark aspects of life. Such a vision only adds to his tragic persona:

> Nor will it at all detract from him, dramatically regarded, if either by birth or other circumstances, he have what seems a half wilful over-ruling morbidness at the bottom of his nature. For all men tragically great are made so through a certain morbidness. Be sure of this, O young ambition, all mortal greatness is but disease. (73-4)

The theme of "over-ruling morbidness" is one which dominates *Moby Dick*. As Ishmael notes, it is an attribute which Ahab shares with his Quaker ancestors. What distinguishes Ahab is the nature of his purpose. Clearly bent on destruction, he will not allow emotion or reason to divert him from his chosen path. In his identification with an absolute, in his conviction that he possesses the right to wage vengeance upon the whale and the universe that violated the sanctity of his being, Ahab endows his life with its tragic predisposition.

Ahab is representative of the modern hero who often possesses obvious flaws, and is thus a figure open to criticism. Criticism and condemnation are, however, two different responses to a given situation. Criticism can serve to bring the reader into closer contact with the hero; the flaws of the hero are perceived as the flaws of mankind and thus representative. Ahab belongs to that group of heroes who elicit "paradoxical sympathies," whose actions defy any human authority and who pay no heed to moral sanctions. His behavior is clearly reprehensible and yet, paradoxically, it is clearly Melville's intention that we do not condemn Ahab. Condemnation negates the tragic for it implies a moral stance, and any sense of judgment also removes the possibility of identification with the tragic hero. It presupposes a superiority over the hero and such a relationship prevents any sympathetic link with him (a dynamic that is dealt with extensively in *Lord Jim*, as we shall see).

There are a number of characteristics in Melville's hero which prevent the reader from condemning Ahab. His limited self-awareness, his realization of the unethical nature of his actions, and the full understanding of the price that his endeavour may cost all serve to temper our opinion. He is also occasionally cognizant of the degree to which his monomania has pulled him away from the life of this world and all the simple felicities of the earth: "...all loveliness is anguish to me, since I can ne'er enjoy. Gifted with the high

perception, I lack the low, enjoying power; damned, most subtly and most malignantly! damned in the midst of Paradise!" (166). He exhibits the awareness that his life could have been otherwise but now, trapped in the irreversible flow of the action and unwilling to forsake the persona he has created for himself, he pursues his purpose to its tragic end. Even when the action has nearly run its course and he is in hot pursuit of the whale, Ahab remains conscious of his immersion in the dark side: "So far gone am I in the dark side of the earth, that its other side, the theoretic bright one, seems but uncertain twilight to me" (519-20). The bright side remains "theoretic" because it possesses no practical reality for Ahab.

Any temptation to condemn Ahab must also take into account what Captain Peleg calls Ahab's "humanities." Ahab's relationships with both Pip and Starbuck indicate some measure of human affection and a sense of that other side of his existence. Like the Fool in *King Lear*, Pip awakens in the hero some awareness of the folly of his position. Pip suffers the mishap of being abandoned at sea and the consequent mental havoc that such isolation can bring. As Ishmael points out: "the awful lonesomeness is intolerable. The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God! who can tell it?" (412) Overwhelmed by the meaninglessness of his existence, however, Pip has gained a certain knowledge - the impersonal wisdom of the insane. Pip's existence then becomes intolerable to Ahab for it mirrors Ahab's insanity. Pip's presence, however, also awakens a certain tenderness in Ahab's soul: "Thou touchest my inmost centre, boy; thou art tied to me by cords woven of my heart strings" (513). The relationship thus serves to momentarily illuminate the life that Ahab has forsaken.

Ahab's relationship with his chief mate is of a much more confrontational nature. It is in those moments of conflict, when Starbuck pits his will against his captain's (for the sake of the crew), that Ahab is forced to express his purpose and comes closest to a recognition of his condition. Starbuck is the novel's moderate man, one who is not attracted by the call of extremity or the need to achieve some incontrovertible act. Ishmael describes the chief mate as an individual who "seemed prepared to endure for long ages to come, and to endure always, as now..." (112). The moderate man is the direct antithesis to the tragic protagonist. He is Ahab's main antagonist but remains rather ineffective in his attempts to

divert the captain from his course. Only near the end of the novel does Starbuck touch something deep inside Ahab's being. In chapter 132, entitled "The Symphony," the elements seem to momentarily combine with Starbuck's pleas to soothe the misery within Ahab's soul:

> That glad, happy air, that winsome sky, did at last stroke and caress him; the step-mother world, so long cruel - forbidding - now threw affectionate arms round his stubborn neck, and did seem to sob joyously over him, as if over one, that however wilful and erring, she could yet find it in her heart to save and to bless. From beneath his slouched hat Ahab dropped a tear into the sea; nor did all the Pacific contain such wealth as that one wee drop. (532)

Here Starbuck achieves a momentary communion with Ahab, and the captain divulges his fears and insecurities about the existence he has led. Ahab concedes to the "desolation of solitude" his life has been and how he has made his wife "rather a widow with her husband alive!" He is fully aware of the disparity between what his life has become and what it might have been - this is the true fate of the tragic hero:

> Aye, I widowed that poor girl when I married her, Starbuck; and then, the madness, the frenzy, the boiling blood and the smoking brow, with which, for a thousand lowerings old Ahab has furiously, foamingly chased his prey - more a demon than a man! - aye, aye! what a forty years' fool - fool - old fool, has old Ahab been! (533)

Starbuck's resistance to Ahab's purpose, his continual insistence that life can be other than it is for Ahab, leads to these illuminations. And Ahab's responses serve to construct a bond of sympathy with both Ishmael and the reader; it is here that we come closest to understanding the drive that pushes Ahab to his doom.

The hero's tragic dilemma is made most clearly visible in Ahab's language and in the distinct contrast with his first mate. If Ahab could adopt some of Starbuck's Christian doctrines some of his hatred would surely dissipate, but then Ahab would not be Ahab. For as his blood begins to boil anew so does the desire to complete his quest. The man who has seen his wife and child in Starbuck's eyes, and who pleads with his chief mate to remain on board when they pursue Moby Dick, is soon replaced by the demon who has controlled Ahab's destiny for so long. Starbuck appeals to Ahab's memories of Nantucket in vain: "But Ahab's glance was averted; like a blighted fruit tree he shook, and cast his last,

cindered apple to the soil" (534). Ahab, much like Macbeth, sees where his path has led him and the irreversibility of the process he has unleashed:

> What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper heart, I durst not so much as dare? Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm? But if the great sun move not of himself; but is as an errand-boy in heaven; nor one single star can revolve, but by some invisible power; how then can this one small heart beat; this one small brain think thoughts; unless God does that beating, does that thinking, does that living and not I. (534-5)

In the act of questioning his actions, Ahab reveals a knowledge of the disparate selves coexisting within his person. By conceding that his pursuit of the whale is not in full accordance with his will, he unveils a self that yearns for the "theoretic bright side" of life. This soliloquy suggests that tragic impulses existing within Ahab, much as in the classical hero, are the driving forces of his destiny. Despite whatever he knows or believes the end of the action will entail, the remotest possibility of success (or, at least, the avoidance of the ultimate failure) spurs the tragic hero on with a fearless abandon unknown to the rest of humanity.

In his desire to test the limits of his earthly constraints Ahab frequently demonstrates what Kerry McSweeney has called an "isolated self-sufficiency" (66). Ahab wishes to rely on no one but Ahab. His early rejection of the pipe and the later destruction of the ship's quadrant indicate his desire to reject convention and follow his own beliefs. By taking this stance, however, Ahab also alienates himself from the rest of the crew and a sense of common purpose is lost. It is in this respect that he demonstrates a distinct lack of compassion or feeling for his fellow men. The disdain with which Ahab treats the captains of other ships, and most particularly the captain of the Rachel, indicates the degree to which his self-imposed isolation tears him away from the life of this world. [6]

Ahab's purpose is submerged in destruction and blasphemy, as Starbuck points out. There can be no sense of renewal arising from the accomplishment of his task; it merely satisfies a personal lust for vengeance and quenches a deep hatred. Ahab does not wish to change the order of things, he merely wishes to destroy . Starbuck, the only man who

raises his voice (albeit momentarily) against Ahab, recognizes this fact when he shouts: "To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous." Ahab's reply to this accusation reveals to everyone the paradoxical nature of his quest:

> Hark ye yet again - the little lower layer. All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event - in the living act, the undoubted deed - there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. (162)

In engaging in this demoniac act, which Ahab fully knows goes against the will of God, if there is a God that wills, he is able to perceive his own independent ability to act. Since the "inscrutable thing" will not reveal itself to Ahab, he will force its hand. Ahab has chosen his specific purpose, one which confers upon him an almost god-like potential, a position he refuses to relinquish to any outside influence, whether human or supernatural. The conflicting sides of his persona are revealed when Captain Peleg calls Ahab "a grand, ungodly, god-like man," illuminating momentarily the paradox that exists in the depths of Ahab's soul (80). For Ahab, Moby Dick has come to embody all the injustice and hardship which man must endure on this earth for no apparent reason. And, like Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ahab searches for an explanation of the universe by reducing it to a single, seemingly apprehensible, entity: "He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his heart's hot shell upon it" (183). By placing man's struggle with the elements and his condition in the context of the battle with the white whale, Ahab situates his existence within a heroic dynamic. The white whale stands as Ahab's symbol for the secret cause; the inscrutable facts of our existence that remain so despite our most resolute efforts to uncover them.

The madness incurred by the loss of his leg and the feverish days spent in his cabin open Ahab's eyes to a world beyond the surface, and to the doubts inherent in such a vision.

Madness plays a very specific role in *Moby Dick*. We first encounter it in the figure of Elijah, whose babbled predictions are not far removed from the truth. Ishmael also considers Pip's insanity to be "heaven's sense;" that in spite of the crew calling him mad, his vision glimpsed something unseen by men. It is Ahab's madness, however, that is the most significant. His awareness of the "little lower layer" and the existence of the "pasteboard mask" causes him to reject surface reality. This rejection prevents him from communicating with his crew and places him out of the reach of human contact. His moments of lucidity are infrequent, his reasons often unclear, and he must rely on the doubloon as a means of uniting the crew's cause with his own. Even as he awaits the hammer to nail the doubloon to the mast, Ishmael notes Ahab's strange demeanour:

> Ahab, without speaking, was slowly rubbing the gold piece against the shirts of his jacket, as if to heighten its lustre, and without using any words was meanwhile lowly humming to himself, producing a sound so strangely muffled and inarticulate that it seemed the mechanical humming of the wheels of his vitality in him. (160)

There is an energy which spurs Ahab on that is beyond the grasp of his crew, and that Ahab himself only dimly understands. He refers to himself as "madness maddened," in an attempt to elucidate his condition: "They think me mad - Starbuck does; but I'm demoniac, I am madness maddened! That wild madness that's only calm to comprehend itself!" (166). Such insanity may only be understood when seen from the interior but is not easily communicated to the exterior world. For Ahab speaks from the dark side, mutters truths that are perceived only through the vital energy produced by madness; truths which a man of moderate means, such as Starbuck, must forbid himself from ever considering if he is to fulfill his responsibility to the community. The figure overwhelmed by insanity is a common one in tragedy. From the Dionysian implications of *The Bacchae*, to *King Lear*, to *The Possessed*, madness serves to shatter the confines of a rationalistic and logic-based universe. By speaking the language of madness, the character is given free rein to express ideas and beliefs that would otherwise be inconceivable. Ophelia's rantings uncover the rotten core of the state of Denmark, hidden below its surface. Ivan Karamazov's "interview" with the Devil ultimately permits him to circumnavigate the defense mechanisms that prevented him from glimpsing the truth about himself. Ahab's madness allows him to fabricate a system, a

fiction, wherein successful action, the killing of the white whale, would lead to concrete answers - the revelation of the secret cause. Ahab's madness, and the assuredness it grants him, permits the leap of logic that turns Moby Dick into a symbol.

In Ahab's view, such malignity embodied on earth allows him to suppose a god, or powers, willing our destruction. Such a view concretizes our despair and, as such, Ahab's purpose can be seen as one that encompasses the desires of all men. Moby Dick stands as a symbol or receptacle for the woes of mankind and as a result Ahab is able to enlist the help of all men in the creation of his fictions. The difference between the crew and Ahab becomes one of degree not kind. As Sewall points out:

> He is no Byronic hero kicking himself loose from the moral universe in ironic bitterness. He took upon himself what he conceived to be the burden of humanity. He faced the darkness as he saw it. Starbuck reconciled it with traditional beliefs; Stubb and Flask laughed it off; Ishmael saw it and adopted his "desperado philosophy." Only Ahab felt what "some deep men feel": "that intangible malignity which has been from the beginning" - whatever it is in nature that makes these hard hearts, whatever oppresses, bewilders, and bears man down. Like Job and Lear, he saw his own misfortunes as a sign of the common lot; and like them he struck back. (102)

The ease with which Ahab manages to enlist the aid of the crew indicates, to some degree, the identification they share with Ahab. The crew do not mutiny, and though Ahab may strike fear in their hearts, their primary reason for following orders is their sense of sharing a common purpose. The life of a whaling ship is portrayed in the novel as one that oscillates between moments of extreme calm and extreme violence. It is a world in which calm is never constant but always threatened by tremendous upheaval. It is in such a world that Ahab attempts to exercise his will, to uncover truths that would remain hidden, that men would prefer to keep hidden. In this regard Ahab wins the (fearful) respect of his men. And in this context we may conceive of Ahab as tragic hero; he is both representative on one level and yet extreme and unreachable on another. Ishmael himself is hard-pressed to explain the attraction:

> Such a crew, so officered, seemed specially picked and packed by some infernal fatality to help him in his monomaniac revenge. How it was that they so aboundingly responded to the old man's ire - by what evil magic their souls were possessed, that at times his hate seemed theirs; the White

> Whale as much their insufferable foe as his; how all this came to be - what the White Whale was to them, or how to their unconscious understandings, also, in some dim and unsuspected way, he might have seemed the gliding great demon of the seas of life - all this to explain, would be to dive deeper than Ishmael can go. (186)

It is clear that no matter how irrational Ahab's rebellion may appear to us on one level, it also appeals to our sense of the injustice of a world over which we wield very little control. Starbuck's belief in God and Christian doctrines enables him to accept these conditions, but it also prevents him from questioning - to glimpse that "little lower layer." We are more likely to share Ishmael's sentiment when he notes: "A wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine" (176). It is finally Ahab's strength of character and wilfullness that wins the crew over.

Thus, we can enumerate the tragic aspects of Ahab's character: his use of language as he strives to name the unnamable, his struggle with a dark vision of the world and the powers ruling over it, and his willful isolation from his fellow men in the pursuit of his quest. This isolation, however, and his egocentric view of his condition, shuts him off from communication with his crew and any illumination or contrasts that might arise from it. As we have noted, it is only in his confrontations with Starbuck that Ahab clearly voices his objectives and his beliefs. Frequently, his diseased perspective permits him only to see the dark side, and so immersed in it is he that he remains blind to all conceptions of self, seeing himself merely as a tool for destruction.

Of the three heroes studied in this thesis, Ahab clearly evinces the most self-awareness while still demonstrating the limitations of the modern tragic hero. The hero no longer embodies the tragedy whole, and Ahab's action is merely the unleashing of the tragic coil. It is through this action and the various responses to it that we can examine our own fates. Ahab's confinement from the "theoretic bright side," for example is balanced by the presence of Ishmael, whose mixed bag of positivism and despair offers a more harmonious, and accessible, view of the world.

Many questions are of course left unanswered in the novel, due in part to Ishmael's philosophy which refuses to give these 'things' any definitive names. The language used by the principal figures leaves all the mysteries for the reader to resolve. One of the questions implicit in the novel is the degree to which one may ever truly know one's self. Near the

end of the novel, Starbuck confronts Ahab in his cabin and is refuted once more, this time at the end of a musket. However, before leaving, Starbuck has a warning for his captain: "Thou hast outraged, not insulted me, sir; but for that I ask thee not to beware of Starbuck; thou wouldst but laugh; but let Ahab beware of Ahab; beware of thyself, old man" (471). There is some logic in Starbuck's threat, for it stands to reason that the only man Ahab need fear is the one he can't control - himself. Ahab acknowledges "there's something there," and that the chief mate has caught the essence of his condition. In fulfilling his isolation, Ahab has looked deep into his soul and lost sight of the world around him. Tragic illumination often occurs during those moments when the surface reality is pierced and the viewer sees beyond the veil of his own existence. It is transcendence gained through suffering and extraordinary conditions. Once conscious of this "other" reality, it becomes difficult for the individual to maintain a passive position, he must either allow himself to be swallowed up by the dark side, or he must exercise his will, though in vain (as he well knows), against the course of events.

Although the ending is as bleak as one could conceive (some critics have seen it as *too* dire), Ahab's efforts do bring about at least a momentary recognition, a brief glimpse of the whole. Richard Sewall suggests that this compensation, a requisite for the tragic form, finally occurs in the novel through Ahab's reconciliation with his different selves. He does not reach as full and clear an understanding as the classical tragic hero, but "in the moment of final conflict he senses a new dimension in his suffering, a relatedness to something other than the sheer malice of the universe, the whiteness of the whale" (104). At the penultimate moment of his destruction, when he suffers the further humiliation of not going down with his ship, Ahab's suffering illuminates his life: "Oh, lonely death on lonely life! Oh, now I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief" (564). He grasps at whatever wisdom can be gained from his short life. As Sewall points out:

> This is not reconciliation with the whale, or with the malice of the universe, but it is a reconciliation of Ahab with Ahab. Whatever justice, or equivalence there is, he has found not in the universe but in himself. He is neither "sultan" now nor "old fool." In finally coming to terms with existence (though too late), he is tragic man; to the extent that he transcends it, finds "greatness in suffering," he is tragic hero. (104)

To the last, Ahab's words represent a knowledge of other worlds, of things as they might have been, and a rebellion against life as it always will be. But Ahab goes to his death, taking the crew of the Pequod with him (save one), and he has clearly not been the recipient of the illumination often foisted upon the hero of old. He expresses little doubt or surprise at the outcome of his action. It is finally left to the reader to draw his own conclusions based entirely on Ishmael's reconstruction.

If Ahab's problem is his immersion in the dark side and his consequent inability to communicate this experience, it could be said that the hero of Conrad's *Lord Jim* stands at the opposite end of the spectrum. Jim demonstrates a continued refusal to face those issues that would divulge the truths of his existence. In his identification with an absolute the tragic hero is often convinced of the innate purity of his pursuit. This combination of identification and conviction often leads to the hero's demise. Having formulated a concept of self that is far too idealized, Jim demonstrates a clear sense of his own superiority over both the crew of the Patna and the people of Patusan while failing to recognize what he shares with these individuals - the human potential for failure.

As in the case of Ahab, Jim's actions awaken a complex set of responses from the people he encounters. Even Marlow seems to waver between opposing poles of opinion when he concludes:

> ...we can see him, an obscure conqueror of fame, tearing himself out of the arms of a jealous love at the sign, at the call of his exalted egoism. He goes away from a living woman to celebrate his pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct. Is he satisfied - quite, now, I wonder? We ought to know... Who knows? He is gone, inscrutable at heart, and the poor girl is leading a sort of soundless, inert life in Stein's house. Stein has aged greatly of late. He feels it himself, and says often that he is "preparing to leave all this; preparing to leave..." while he waves his hand sadly at his butterflies. (313)

Marlow insists that "we ought to know" the truth of Jim's tale, yet we cannot know. This absence of closure places *Lord Jim* firmly within the ongoing discussion of the relationship between tragedy and the whole truth, and the notion that tragedy often accentuates the inherent uncertainty and incompleteness of our existence. As J.Hillis Miller proclaims:

> ...from whatever angle it is approached *Lord Jim* reveals itself to be a work which raises questions rather than answering them. The fact that it

> contains its own interpretations does not make it easier to understand. The overabundance of possible explanations only inveigles the reader to share in the self-sustaining motion of a process of interpretation which cannot reach an unequivocal conclusion. This weaving movement of advance and retreat constitutes and sustains the meaning of the text, that evasive center which is everywhere and nowhere in the play of its language. (39)

A number of elements contribute to this impression. Aside from Marlow's ambiguity and intellectual refusal to commit himself, the numerous interpretations offered by other characters also serve to temper our opinion. As one critic notes: "the novel seeks to perpetuate the anxiety of uncertainty" (Ressler, 32). Each opinion offered to Marlow on Jim's case either corroborates or invalidates those that have come before, leaving the reader to formulate his own (uncertain) judgments of Jim.

Jim's principal weakness is his inability to perceive the gap that stretches between his idealistic vision and the surrounding reality. The disparity between the surface appearance of things and the deeper truths they conceal, a predominant theme in the novel, is seen most clearly in the events of the Inquiry. The omniscient narrator, perhaps the most "reliable" source in the novel, emphasizes the sharp contrast between Jim and the resolute men he faces. Reading Jim's mind, the narrator exclaims: "They wanted facts. Facts! They demanded facts from him, as if facts could explain anything!" (27). The dichotomy between concrete facts and the all-too intangible human motivations that exist in contrast to them is a central concern of Marlow's narrative. At the beginning of chapter 6, Marlow indicates that the physical data is hardly the crucial part of the matter. The details of the story are already public knowledge. Marlow insists that the crowd has gathered for another reason: "Whether they knew it or not, the interest that drew them there was purely psychological - the expectation of some essential disclosure as to the strength, the power, the horror, of human emotions" (48). What interests both the crowd and Marlow, in comparison with what the Inquiry sets out to discover, serves to point to the essential dichotomy of the tragic vision. Of the Inquiry Marlow observes:

> Its object was not the fundamental why, but the superficial how, of this affair...The young chap could have told them, and, though that very thing was the thing that interested the audience, the questions put to him necessarily led him away from what to me, for instance, would have been the only truth worth knowing. (48)

To Marlow "the only truth worth knowing" is what Jim's failure tells us about the the insufficiencies of convention in fully representing the human condition. Jim's presence serves to shatter the illusion of stability that is a fundamental element of the communal structure, and instills a sense of uncertainty that is not easily shaken. Jim's simplicity and his inability to express his plight in terms that would communicate its essence to others, only causes any answers to be further obscured. Marlow ultimately sees Jim as something less than a hero, perhaps even an egocentric fool. But Marlow cannot dismiss him because he also visualizes Jim as the image of an "idea" that *is* tragic. *Lord Jim*, like much of Conrad's fiction, focusses its attention on a glimpse of the epistemelogical uncertainty of our condition and the consequences that emerge from apprehending this fact.

It is the author's intention, of course, that the reader identify with Jim, to more or less the same degree that Marlow does. Jim exists as a potential symbol of perfection, a figure with whom we can all sympathize and have faith. Our response to Jim is a human one, but one that is all too often based on a lie, a misapprehension, and done to our own detriment. It is folly to place any faith in human infalliblity for, as Conrad's fiction so often points out, such a state remains unattainable. As Marlow himself notes of Jim: " I would have trusted the deck to that youngster on the strength of a single glance, and gone to sleep with both eyes - and by Jove! it wouldn't have been safe. There are depths of horror in that thought" (40). The recognition of the inevitability of failure and guilt, mankind's fallen state, in the midst of potential glory, contributes to the tragic awareness that underlies the narrative of *Lord Jim*.

This realization is concretized for Marlow when he sees Jim in Patusan. Jim almost believes the tales (or myths) created by the villagers about him because they serve to reinforce his self-image - one that Marlow argues Jim comes very close to attaining. It is this inability to fully recognize the fallability present in the absolutes he adopts that seals Jim's fate. He refuses to acknowledge that there are no given absolutes, that men have fabricated their own absolutes to follow, and that they are therefore tainted by the imperfection inherent in all human action. His very refusal to be inhibited by this knowledge requires of him increasing and relentless effort. As Ian Watt notes: "Jim's conflict with himself and with the world can never be appeased or resolved; and the intensity with which

Jim confronts this intractable conflict gives him something of the representativeness of the tragic hero" (12). [7] While this may be, one must also note that Jim is *so* absorbed by the disparity that exists between his idealized self-image and what he knows to be the truth, that he is blind to the role he must play within the communal structure. As Suresh Raval argues:

> The tragedy of Jim's stance inheres in his attempt to prove to the world the essential wholeness and integrity of his self. Jim is so completely entrapped within his vision of things, within his affirmation of the abstract ideals of honor and self, that he is alienated from those in relation to whom his values make relative and human sense. (69)

When Marlow notes that, "still the idea obtrudes itself that [Jim] made so much of his disgrace while it is the guilt alone that matters" (136), he is distinguishing between Jim's manner of perceiving the world and his own. Marlow differentiates between feelings of disgrace and of guilt, sensing that this distinction lies at the heart of Jim's difficulties with the "fixed standard of conduct" and his own problems in grasping the specific quality of Jim's struggle. It is shame that drives Jim - not a desire to redeem himself in the eyes of the community but in his own eyes. Marlow distinguishes between personal shame for an action that contradicts one's exalted impression of self and the pain that derives from the knowledge of the ways in which one's actions may cause irreperable harm to the community. The reason Jim's case so troubles Marlow is that although Jim appears to regret his actions he does so for the wrong reasons. This becomes evident when Jim states that: "There was not the thickness of a sheet of paper between the right and wrong of this affair" (102). In so admirably misunderstanding and misapplying the code, Jim inadvertently exposes its inability to account for the ambiguous aspects of the human condition.

Conrad's novel insists the idealistic visions of its hero must be balanced by a rational sense of responsibility devoid of self-glorification, and an acknowledgment of the shortcomings inherent in his nature. At an early point in the novel, for example, Marlow speaks of "the Dark Powers whose real terrors, always on the verge of triumph, are perpetually foiled by the steadfastness of men" (96). It is men such as the helmsmen of the Patna, who continued to steer the ship in the face of disaster because no order was given to do otherwise, and the French lieutenant, who remained aboard the stricken ship for thirty-two hours after the disaster, who offer the most crippling commentary on Jim's actions.

They, too, experience fear, but the code of conduct allows them to finally prevail over the Dark Powers. As the French lieutenant explains to Marlow:

> Each of them - I say each of them, if he were an honest man - *bien entendu* - would confess that there is a point - there is a point - for the best of us - there is somewhere a point when you let go everything (*vous lâchez tout*). And you have got to live with that truth - do you see? Given a certain combination of circumstances, fear is sure to come. Abominable funk (*un trac épouvantable*). And even for those who do not believe this truth there is fear all the same - the fear of themselves. (114)

What appears evident to the French lieutenant is the very thing Jim refuses to admit about himself. The exposition of this flaw in Jim's character is surely the intention of the omniscient narrator in the opening chapters of the novel. Though he attempts to give the facts, free of any bias or judgmental commentary, his entire narration is nevertheless tinged with irony. The narrator introduces a figure who has constructed a conception of self "after a course of light holiday literature,"; a self-image which he does not allow to be shaken despite the occurrence of incidents that would argue for a more revisionary outlook. Both the storm and the injury Jim suffers should make him aware of the unpredictability of events and that imagination is not a suitable weapon to combat the dangers that may await him. In fact in the training-ship episodes Jim's imagination is perceived as faulty and consequently detrimental to the rest of the crew. The narrator suggests that every man possesses a "secret truth," and despite what one may imagine, this "truth is not so often made apparent as one might think" (14). Jim's pursuit of his ideal blinds him to the fact that he is no better than the other men on the training ship (in fact, he is worse), and allows him to maintain his unfounded feelings of superiority. What the omniscient narrator is also underlining is that "the truth" can only be seen by those who truly wish to see it and not by those who are merely prone to defend themselves against it. There is a degree of risk involved, as is exemplified in the story of Bob Stanton, but it is one that must be assumed if man is to endure this "malevolent providence" - a notion never truly contemplated by the hero of Conrad's novel.

That Jim awakens tragic doubt in others (as in the case of Brierly), while remaining unaware of the impact of his actions on the community is part of the tragic irony of Conrad's novel. Both Marlow and the community recognize the threat Jim poses (and this

explains the Inquiry's condemnations of Jim's actions aboard the Patna), and the source from which this threat arises. At one point Marlow notes that Jim, "was too much like one of us not to be dangerous" (85), emphasizing the attraction that Jim's ideal holds for all humanity. The ironies and contradictions that Jim's presence elicits finally push Marlow to turn to Stein for a solution.

Stein's assessment of Jim is the last and the fullest in a series of interpretations offered in the Patna section of the novel. Ultimately, Stein's contribution proves to be almost as cryptic as any other in the novel. He remains a fundamental part of the process of discovery of the inevitable facts of Jim's tale, however, for both Marlow and the reader. All other attempts at finding Jim a means to live his life have encountered failure at the slightest remembrance of his past deeds (Mr.Denver, Egström and Blake), all of which indicate Jim's reluctance to face any truths about himself and his condition. Stein's analysis of Jim's problem, and the solution he proposes illuminate the irresolvable paradox existing within Jim's soul:

> Man is amazing, but he is not a masterpiece,... Perhaps the artist was a little mad. Eh? What do you think? Sometimes it seems to me that man is come where he is not wanted, where there is no place for him; for if not, why should he want all the place? Why should he run around here and there making a great noise about himself, talking about the stars, disturbing the blades of grass?...(159)

Such a quote illuminates Jim's design and indicates the principal reason for considering Conrad's novel as a vehicle of tragedy. This cosmic desire Stein speaks of is embodied directly in the classical tragic hero - in Oedipus, Agamemnon, and to a lesser degree in Hamlet, and Lear. These figures are in touch with the cosmos at their moment of physical divorce from it, most usually their deaths. But the new form of tragedy occurs primarily on an intellectual level. Stein helps Marlow to see Jim as the image of an idea that is tragic. He talks of these ideas as dramatized in human actions - but we, as listeners, are too acutely aware of the gap separating us from the fulfillment of such ideas. Our tragedy is to discover that all ideals, all truths, all absolutes, are in principle beyond our reach. This is Marlow's discovery through Jim's life; Stein already knows it. True to the modern formulation of tragedy, recognition is not experienced by the hero through his actions but by Marlow and the reader through reflection on Jim's actions.

Stein's assessment of Jim is that the young man "is romantic." Both he and Marlow agree there is no "cure" for one's existence, but the question becomes how one lives with this truth. The conclusion these men reach is that Jim is unable to live with the contradictions of his life. As Stein explains, "He wants to be a saint, and he wants to be a devil - and every time he shuts his eyes he sees himself as a very fine fellow - so fine as he can never be....In a dream..." (162-3). The most cryptic pronouncement is the oft-quoted one:

> Yes! Very funny this terrible thing is. A man that is born falls into a dream like a man that falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavour to do, he drowns - *nicht wahr* ? No! I tell you! The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up. So if you ask me - how to be? (165-6)

His analysis of Jim's plight suggests the individual must attempt to make a life for himself out of those elements that will ultimately destroy him. The cryptic quality of Stein's pronouncements serves a purpose in conveying the modern tragic vision. It is that the idea (internal struggle) has become the true battle ground for tragic confrontation. This coincides with Conrad's intention that the novel revolve around Marlow's struggle for meaning, rather than in Jim's story itself.

Immediately following his pronouncement on the "destructive element," Stein's attitude appears less certain as though unwilling to confront the truths he has managed to conjure. It is as if he is rendered speechless by the tragic possibilities of his talk, anticipating the inevitable end that awaits Jim. As Marlow notes, "his twitching lips uttered no word, and the austere exaltation of a certitude seen in the dusk vanished from his face" (163). Marlow himself is struck by the shift in mood and by Stein's repeated wish that they should both "do something practical." He continues to coax the collector for some definite statements, using Stein's own life as an example. Jim's tale, however, has awakened certain fears in Stein's mind. When Marlow asks Stein whether he had not fulfilled his ideal, the old man answers:

> And do you know how many opportunities I let escape; how many dreams I had lost that had come in my way?...It seems to me that some would have been very fine - if I had made them come true. Do you know how many? Perhaps I myself don't know.(166)

Stein's life thus stands in direct contrast to Jim's. Stein recognizes the essential fact - that we all aspire and fail - but he lives with it. He accepts momentary success and irrevocable failure as the due course of life, largely because he does not have an idealized concept of self he wishes to preserve. One can only live with this acceptance of the "destructive element." The only escape is through death. Stein, however, places a great deal of faith in Jim accomplishing his dream (a faith that reveals itself as shattered, at the end of the novel, when he returns to his boxes of dead butterflies for consolation). Perhaps Stein feels that Jim had already exhibited his ability to fail, and given another chance would demonstrate his potential to succeed. In a sense, Stein's philosophy is one of endurance. We must continue on our way, he suggests, accepting failure as a symptom of our fallen condition, and with this concession (as in the case of the French lieutenant) comes the greater probability for success. Stein's belief in Jim's eventual success is fostered by hope and an inability to perceive Jim's refusal to accept this fallen state of man.

The notion of a hero carrying out his struggle unaware of the backdrop onto which these actions are thrown is a believable one for the modern reader. At one point Marlow questions whether a state of self-awareness is, in fact, possible. It is a doubt that proves to be quite revelatory. He posits that, "it is my belief no man understands quite his own artful dodges to escape from the grim shadow of self-knowledge" (65). Does this serve to explain the ironic tone that runs throughout the novel? In contrast to the classical tragic hero, Jim's tale is a tragedy, paradoxically, because he never achieves the self-recognition of his literary ancestors. By remaining fixated on his idealized concept of self and oblivious to the truths his experience would reveal to him, Jim achieves no recognition. He never exhibits a moment of doubt or of introspection concerning his situation. Rather, he perceives the outcome of his life as inevitable; there are merely obstacles to be overcome along the way before complete success is granted him. Jim's final act, his decision to give himself over to Doramin and death, is entirely in character. What it presents unequivocally is the magnitude of Jim's self-centeredness.

There has been much discussion whether Jim's "exalted egoism" constitutes an equivalent to the *hubris* of Greek tragic heroes.[8] His conclusion that there "is nothing to fight for" is made in complete disregard for Jewel's love, Tamb' Itam's loyalty, or his

pledged responsibility to the people of Patusan. When Jewel asks whether he will defend himself he answers, "Nothing can touch me," in what Marlow terms, "a last flicker of superb egoism" (310). Can we really see his death as an atonement for his sins, or a conscious effort at redemption? Is it not rather the realization of his own misguided notion of duty and honor? Dorothy Van Ghent, in her study of the novel concludes that, "Moral isolation provides a new inflection on tragedy" (232). She contrasts Jim with Orestes and Oedipus who, in destroying themselves, save their respective cities. In death, however, Jim does nothing more than abandon Patusan and Jewel to an uncertain future. Van Ghent continues her comparison of *Lord Jim* and Greek tragedy by noting:

> Thus there is nothing structurally internal to Jim's story that matches the positive moral relationship, in the ancient dramas, between the social destiny and the hero's destiny, the relationship that is presented concretely in the fact that the hero's agony is a saving social measure. There is nothing to mediate, practically and concretely, between Jim's "truth" and real social life, as a benefit to and confirmation of the social context. Jim is alone. (232)

However, the question becomes whether Jim is the perpetrator of his own demise or a victim of an inescapable modern condition? For Jim creates that moral void, he does not encounter it. This impression is attenuated somewhat by Marlow's conviction that Jim behaves as he does because he is obeying instructions that emanate from a higher plane of knowledge:

> The point, however, is that of all mankind Jim had no dealings but with himself, and the question is whether at the last he had not confessed to a faith mightier than the laws of order and progress.(255)

Here, Marlow seeks to make a tragic hero of Jim. The irony, of course is that Jim betrays any faith or trust invested in him. His inability to distinguish between a concept of absolute truth and the necessary imperfections of daily life is the main component of his downfall. His pursuit of an ideal also impinges on the man-made "laws of order and progress" because it places both the pilgrims on the Patna and the villagers of Patusan in mortal danger. This is Jim's greatest failure. He refuses to acknowledge the lessons of experience. The events aboard the Patna should have alerted him to the contingent nature of his existence. Instead his strict adherence to his ideal allows him to view the outcome of his life as entirely

predictable. Such assuredness incapacitates Jim for recognizing differences between abstract concepts such as courage and fear, right and wrong, or shame and guilt.

The closest Jim comes to recognizing his unavoidable guilt and the necessity to accept failure occurs during his confrontation with Gentleman Brown. Jim's encounter with Brown is unquestionably the crucial action in the second part of the novel, and as such it shares certain similarities with the Patna incident. [9] Marlow writes to the privileged man that he immediately detected the evil that resided in Brown. Brown, in fact, stands as the physical embodiment of the unpredictable universe of *Lord Jim.* He is introduced in Marlow's narrative as a man "battling with an adverse fortune, till at last, running his appointed course, he sails into Jim's history, a blind accomplice of the Dark Powers" (266). Brown's motives and personality are evident to Marlow, who notes that the buccaneer possesses "an undisguised ruthlessness of purpose, a strange vengeful attitude towards his own past, and a blind belief in the righteousness of his will against all mankind..." (278-9). Brown personifies evil, evil for its own sake, indiscriminate evil. He exhibits a hatred for humanity in general, as Marlow notes:

> ...what distinguished him from his contemporary brother ruffians...was the arrogant temper of his misdeeds and a vehement scorn for mankind at large and for his victims in particular. The others were merely vulgar and greedy brutes, but he seemed moved by some complex intention. (265)

Marlow's recounting of Brown's adventures, leading up to his entry into Patusan, presents a man very much at the mercy of the elements and circumstance. The "complex intention" that guides Brown is the desire to exact revenge on an uncontrollable world that has thwarted his every move. The universe of the novel has tested both Brown and Jim, and each has found a different way of surviving his particular situation. As such, one may perceive Brown and his purity of purpose as a dark reflection of the persona Jim wishes to maintain - an alter ego of sorts.

It is this pristine image Jim projects that most blatantly confronts and challenges Brown on his arrival in Patusan: "Rot his superior soul!" (259). Brown tells Marlow that he was immediately aware of the kind of man Jim was, calling him "a hollow sham." There is a degree of earnestness in Brown's actions because he truthfully believes in his right to exact revenge on any individual whom he perceives to have lived a charmed life. This belief

illuminates his perceptions and gives him insight into the true nature of Jim's personality. As Marlow notes of Brown, he "had a gift for finding out the best and the weakest spot in his victims" (290). The weakness which Brown discovers is, of course, Jim's inability to live with the "truth" of (his) existence. Despite his accomplishments in Patusan, Jim is unable to reconcile his present success with his past folly. But, in his confrontation with Jim, Brown is able to induce a sense of shared guilt:

> And there ran through the rough talk a vein of subtle reference to their shared blood, an assumption of common experience; a sickening suggestion of common guilt, of secret knowledge that was like a bond of their minds and of their hearts. (291)

Jim's error lies in not recognizing the degree to which Brown represents the opposite end of the moral spectrum from himself. His refusal to admit to the contingency of his existence, and his unwillingness to accept that he does not wield complete control over his life, blind him to the possible consequences of permitting Brown's departure. Brown may awaken a "sense of common guilt" in Jim, but Jim's defense is simply to allow Brown to leave and, in so doing, neglect his moral responsibility to Patusan as its protector. For Brown represents Jim's own sense of himself, and killing him would be tantamount to acknowledging a sense of guilt over the Patna incident. Jim's response to Brown recalls the earlier incident in the courtroom where he mistakenly believes that Marlow has called him "a damn cur." Both incidents betray the fragility of Jim's idealized sense of self. If he is to preserve this concept of self, however, Jim has no choice but to let Brown go. For if he does not, he acknowledges that he, himself, was not worthy of a second chance and must concede to his fallen state.

Paradoxically, as a number of critics have pointed out, it is at the moment Jim permits Brown's departure that he is most "true" to his nature. [10] Jim's dilemma is his faith that proper intentions will guarantee acceptable results. But, both his intentions and actions cannot be perceived or performed in isolation - they have their place in the world and thus have the capacity to affect others. His success in Patusan, and the consequent idolatry of the villagers, have permitted Jim to believe that his idealized conception of self is a possibility. Jim's failure to recognize the moral reasons for the existence of this ideal leads to his betrayal of the people of Patusan. Trapped within his solipsistic interpretation of this ideal,

Jim is unable to perceive that his action and martyrdom are no longer distinguishable from betrayal and suicide. It is this aspect of Jim's tale that arrests Marlow's interest, for it reveals the possible misapplications of the "fixed standard of conduct."

In permitting Brown's departure, Jim demonstrates a blindness that prevents him from anticipating the recurrence of failure - he has failed to learn there are elements in the universe that remain beyond his control - no matter how honorable his intentions may be. Only a vague suspicion of this fact is revealed when Jim tells Marlow that the inhabitants of Patusan "can never know the real, real truth," about him (230). Only with the killing of Dain Waris does Jim come to the stark realization that his dream remains, and always will be, an unobtainable one. This knowledge rattles Jim, as it does most tragic heroes, to the very center of his being. In this regard, it is possible to see the similarities, as Dorothy Van Ghent does, between Oedipus and Jim. Though he may not strive to learn the truth in the same manner as Oedipus, the intensity with which he pursues his idealized concept of self bears certain similarities to the Greek's quest.

Lord Jim, however, presents us with a hero who never fully acquires the self-knowledge of Oedipus, and thus never suffers the tragic dilemma - a fate reserved for the choric man and a couple of insightful observers in the novel. Only a faint glimmer of self-knowledge appears to emerge in Marlow's narrative when he describes the letter Jim strives in vain to write shortly before his death. Marlow writes to the privileged man that, "one wonders whether this was perhaps that supreme opportunity, that last and satisfying test for which I had always suspected him to be waiting, before he could frame a message to the impeccable world" (255). But Jim remains unequal to the task of expressing this knowledge, perhaps cowed by the very power of his imagination, or the magnitude of his own failure. Jim begins his letter by stating that an "awful thing has happened," but is clearly unable to go any further. Marlow projects what he believes to have been Jim's internal struggle when he suggests:

> The pen had spluttered, and that time he gave it up. There's nothing more; he had seen a broad gulf that neither eye nor voice could span. I can understand this. He was overwhelmed by the inexplicable; he was overwhelmed by his own personality - the gift of that destiny which he had done his best to master. (256)

The role of the tragic hero has always been to grapple with the inexplicable, to extract what he might from the unyielding abstract, and communicate it to others. Clearly, Jim falls terribly short of this goal. Failure is implicit in the tragic hero's struggle but Jim has not only failed on this level. He has also been unsuccessful in learning anything about himself and the human condition. This lack of insight ultimately prevents him from "framing a message to the impeccable world."

The willingness with which he embraces the thought of his death also indicates the superficial view he possesses of his existence. In this respect, he does not so much resemble Oedipus, as he does Antigone:

> Then Jim understood. He had retreated from one world, for a small matter of an impulsive jump, and now the other, the work of his own hands, had fallen in ruins upon his head...I believe that in that very moment he had decided to defy the disaster in the only way it occurred to him such a disaster could be defied...The dark powers should not rob him twice of his peace. (307)

And this is Jim's weakness - the rapidity with which he acquiesces to the dark powers, without ever attempting to learn why these events should occur to him or learn any of the truths about himself. As such he is far removed from the intensity of spirit of the hero in *Oedipus at Colonus* or of the strength Lear continues to demonstrate after his time upon the heath. And this question plagues Marlow's narrative: is there a means by which the individual may achieve a balance between the surface truths of the community and the darker human truths, and still continue to live?

The question arises whether one should attempt to distinguish between seeing Jim as a fool or simply as an individual blinded by his purpose. This serves to explain Marlow's constant fluctuations between approval and condemnation. When he suspects that Jim is pursuing "a faith mightier than the laws of order and progress," he is clearly establishing Jim as "a thunderingly exalted creature" - one who is "altogether deaf and blind to anything but heavenly sights and sounds." As such Marlow must continually struggle against the impulse, or desire, to turn Jim into some kind of deity. We all harbor a need for gods and heroes, someone or something to believe in, and will create them at whatever expense. The critical reception of *Lord Jim* is proof enough of this phenomenon. The majority of critics have tried to fit Jim into the traditional hero mold, as an individual who seeks redemption for

his past failures and who finally atones for his sins with his death. [11] There are sufficient clues in the novel, however, pointing to the fact that Jim is clearly not meant to be perceived as fulfilling the role of the traditional hero. The first four chapters clearly indicate that we must see Jim as a man with severe limitations. In retrospect we must interpret the appellation of "Lord" bestowed upon Jim as an ironic one. Jim fails but it is in the very act of failing that he elicits sympathy from Marlow. Arnold Davidson makes a similar point when he states:

> In short, having disposed of Jim, the failed hero, we have not at all disposed of Jim, the heroic failure who went even into death trailing after intimations of immortality. The reader's problem is at the end, then, the same as Marlow's was at the beginning. What does one make of the unconscious duplicity and inescapable duality that informs Jim's most characteristic actions, which are, after all, dreams of imagined success and denials of real failure? (29)

This is the problem which confronts Marlow and, as Davidson notes, the reader. Why are all man's endeavours ultimately doomed to failure, and to what degree is this feeling inextricably attached to the inevitability of death? The question for the reader becomes one of reconciliation and it is in resolving it that one becomes aware of the tragic repercussions contained in Jim's tale.

In modern tragedy the emphasis shifts from the completion of the tragic action to an understanding of it and the world that engulfs it. Finding the tragedy no longer completely embodied by the hero, the reader turns to the choric narrator for the necessary clues leading to the tragic discovery. The hero becomes increasingly unaware - one may note the obvious contrast between Ahab and Jim - as if with every action his understanding diminishes further. In consequence, the choric figure's role expands until the act of discovery itself takes on tragic dimensions. The end of Conrad's novel, particularly Stein's response to Jim's death, points in this direction. Taking his cue from Conrad, Faulkner elaborates upon this dialectic, making the element of tragic discovery the focus of *Absalom, Absalom!*.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* William Faulkner embellishes the impressionist technique used by Conrad in *Lord Jim*, and provides the reader with an alternate way of observing the hero. The tragedy of the House of Sutpen is recreated fifty years after the fact in four separate narratives. The reader quickly discovers the figure of Thomas Sutpen is a malleable quantity

that can be shaped to fit, and corroborate, any number of assorted motives. The critic is also faced with the problem of discussing a character who is little more than an imaginative construct. In this detail, the critic is not dissimilar from the narrators in the novel. Thus, the question occasionally arises whether the character assembled is the "true" Thomas Sutpen or merely one who serves the purpose of the narrator's, or the critic's, argument.

The single point of view, of an Ishmael or a Marlow, is replaced by these multiple perspectives. The juxtaposition of these diverse interpretations contributes a degree of objectivity not found in the earlier novels. Combined, however, with the length of time separating the narration from the actual occurrence of events, this juxtaposition also creates a larger gap between the hero and the reader. As the hero grows increasingly indistinct we are drawn closer to the struggle undergone by the various narrators to make sense of these events, and Quentin's in particular. We are obliged to give credence to intuition and speculation, endowing the Sutpen saga with a shadowy quality that can only be overcome through our own efforts.

Albert Guerard stresses the significance of the "unrealistic" aspects of Faulkner's novel when he argues that *Absalom, Absalom!* asserts, "the primacy of fiction, and of the creative and speculative mind, over verifiable reality..." (*Triumph*, 302). He posits that the various (mis)interpretations of the few known facts forwarded by the narrators endow Sutpen's tale with a Reality greater than any reality contained in any firsthand account. Founded on the beliefs and intuitions of the various narratives, the tale takes on a magnitude greater than its individual parts. Such is the impression derived from a reading of the first few pages of Miss Rosa's narrative, as we begin to feel that a "true" image of the hero emerges despite the narrator's intentions:

> Out of quiet thunderclap he would abrupt (man - horse -demon) upon a scene peaceful and decorous as a schoolprize water color, faint sulphur-reek still in hair clothes and beard, with grouped behind him his band of wild niggers like beasts half-tamed to walk upright like men, in attitudes wild and reposed, and manacled among them the French architect with his hair grim, haggard, and tatter-ran...Then in the long unamaze Quentin seemed to watch them overrun suddenly the hundred square miles of tranquil and astonished earth and drag house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing and clap them down like cards upon a table

> beneath the up-palm immobile and pontific, creating the Sutpen's Hundred, the *Be Sutpen's Hundred* like the oldentime *Be-Light.* (8-9)

So opens the novel as both the reader and Quentin Compson fall victim to the mesmerizing effects of Miss Rosa's description of Sutpen's arrival in Jefferson. In her narrative, this demon mysteriously arises from the "soundless Nothing" to wreak havoc on the South, the town of Jefferson, and the Coldfield family in particular. John Longley notes that the sparsity of the imagery at the start of the novel serves Faulkner's tragic vision: "This is the classic technique of the empty stage - the two planks and a passion - out of which, as the various voices tell and retell what they know or must believe, the tragedy is born..." (207). Faulkner has a specific purpose in placing Miss Rosa's narrative at the beginning, for it immediately emphasizes the mythical aspects of Sutpen's character and history. In this frenzied account of events the hero takes on a magnitude that, despite whatever we may learn in the remainder of the novel, is never entirely diminished.

The figure of Sutpen is clearly larger, as Faulkner maintained, than any that can or might be contained in the different narratives that attempt to explain, and encompass, it. [12] By the time Miss Rosa undertakes to recount her impressions to Quentin, Thomas Sutpen is local legend; his tale has become an ever-present part of Jefferson's, and Quentin's, past. It is only in Miss Rosa's account, however, that Sutpen is gifted with unworldly, quasi-demonic, qualities. She may condemn Sutpen as a demon, but in doing so she also acknowledges those abilities and strengths that elevate him above the ranks of mortal men. The elusive qualities of Sutpen shall remain so throughout the novel as each narrative attempts unsuccessfully to grasp what kind of man this legend was. Richard Sewall, for example, notes of the novel: "Starting with the moment, [Faulkner] dips deep into the individual and communal past (his saga of the South resembles the *Oresteia* in this) until the present emerges in a kind of dark luminousness, the characteristic half-light of tragedy" (134). Whether this "half-light" is a characteristic of tragedy in general or not, it can surely be pinpointed as a fundamental element of the twentieth century strain, and of Faulkner's fiction in particular. The multi-layered narrative of *Absalom, Absalom!* provides the degree of ambivalence that permits the individual to believe in the mythological figures he creates for himself. The element of time serves to shade and put in relief events that occurred half a century earlier. As Sewall notes: "many meanings are revealed that help explain, partly

illuminate, and transcend the ugly surface facts of the saga of Sutpen" (135). Each narrator, in turn, is left to his own imaginative reconstruction of the events as he or she believes, or wishes to believe, they truly occurred.

In an essay comparing Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, John Paterson complains that it is precisely such techniques which prevent Faulkner's novel from attaining the level of tragedy, while Hardy's work does so by conforming to the demands of the tragic form. He contends Hardy's novel is "spared, by its freedom from the psychological norm, that disproportionate emphasis on character that might have complicated at least its status as tragedy," while the novelist of *Absalom, Absalom!* is too concerned with psychological realism and the demands of the experimental novel to observe the requirements of the tragic form (33). Shortly after he points to *The Mayor of Casterbridge* as an illustration of the fact that "the novel can fulfill its primary obligation to be lifelike, to represent the specific conditions of a time and place, and at the same time so far transcend them, so far reduce them to means, as to satisfy the more artistic, more artificial requirements of tragedy" (34). Paterson's approach to tragedy is clearly a traditional one, as his frequent references to Aristotle would indicate. His essay suggests that the novel, if it wishes to produce the tragic effect, must bend to the demands of the tragic form. The final implication is that tragedy and the modern novel are not compatible forms.

Paterson posits a number of explanations for the failure of Faulkner's novel as tragedy. The lack of mystery surrounding Sutpen (we are privy to his motives), the absence of any kind of redemption or "note of grace" at the end of the novel, and Faulkner's use of a series of narrators which excludes the sense of impending doom that is an intrinsic element of tragedy, are all reasons put forth to explain why *Absalom, Absalom!* falls short where Hardy's novel succeeds. Paterson also suggests the distance between the audience and the action presented is a fundamental element of the tragic form, and that this distance, already present in the act of reading, is enlarged to such a degree by Faulkner's manipulation of time and reality that the tragic effect is rendered powerless. He concentrates his attention on Sutpen as tragic hero, yet ignores the effect that the passing of time and its consequent erasing of trivial details may contribute to the fulfillment of Sutpen as a mythological figure.

He also feels the presence of Quentin Compson, as a receptacle for the past, can only cause the novel to fall short in its attempts:

> The vital question for tragedy, however, is whether it is the subject or the object that has the benefit of the vividness and concreteness, and in the case of *Absalom, Absalom!*, the vividness and concreteness are more for the subject, for Rosa Coldfield and Quentin Compson, than for the object, for Thomas Sutpen and his tragic history. What occupies the novel, after all, is not the external drama of the hero but the internal drama of the narrators, their misinterpretations and distortions of the external drama, their investigation and final discovery of its central meaning...But if it is Quentin's tragedy and not Sutpen's, then it is for obvious reasons no tragedy at all. (38)

Paterson's emphasis clearly lies in seeing tragedy in the action, rather than in the idea. He disregards any illumination that may come to Quentin which Sutpen has forsaken. He also does not take into account the possibility of the reader seeing Quentin's tragedy on a level removed and distinct from that of Sutpen's. Paterson's essay raises a number of issues concerning the disparity between classical tragedy, the novel, and a modern strain of the tragic form. The following pages will attempt to deal with those questions relating to the hero in *Absalom, Absalom!*, while the next chapter will focus its attention on the role of the participant observer.

The figure of Sutpen grows throughout the novel, in the demonizing of Miss Rosa and the philosophical tragedy constructed by Mr.Compson, but the image remains a cloudy one that is only partially illuminated by the evidence submitted in chapter 7. [13] The words may have originated from Sutpen himself but they come to us after having been filtered through a long line of tellers, as each of the three generations of Compsons attempts to impose his own interpretation upon the story of Sutpen. One of the results of this multi-layered narrative is that the reader must continually reassess who and what he believes the hero to be. Sutpen is fairly well established as the villain of the piece, long before we learn of his adolescence, his "innocence," or the rejection at the door of the mansion - an event that changes his life forever. The purpose of this reversal is two-fold. Firstly, the reader, who begins by sharing the view of the community towards the hero (suspicion, cynicism...), is often forced to open his eyes to the possibility of human prejudice, ignorance, and hatred. Secondly, our opinion of the central character undergoes a dramatic re-evaluation, causing us to be far more

susceptible to those qualities the hero might possess and to sympathize more deeply with his plight. [14]

In chapter 7, Sutpen is seen as an "innocent," a young boy who emerges from the pastoral paradise of West Virginia unaware of the evils existing just beyond the mountains. He first encounters the new system of beliefs when he realizes one man may wield power over another merely due to his possessions and his race:

> Because where he lived the land belonged to anybody and everybody and so the man who would go to the trouble and work to fence off a piece of it and say 'This is mine' was crazy; and as for objects, nobody had any more of them than you did because everybody had just what he was strong enough or energetic enough to take and keep, and only the crazy man would go to the trouble to take or even want more than he could eat or swap for powder and whiskey. So he didn't even know that there was a country all divided and fixed and neat because of what color their skins happened to be and what they happened to own... (221)

Sutpen's was a primitive world, free from class restrictions or acts of domination. Thus, he is innocent in a number of ways, not the least of which is his ignorance of the fact that he *is* innocent. It is in this precarious state that he suffers the rejection at the door of the mansion. His reaction is a natural and justifiable one. He has suffered an injustice, that his strong spirit must react against if he is to live with himself. The thought of murder is soon replaced by the rifle analogy, which in itself proves to be inadequate. Sutpen then builds on the analogy, concluding that he must use the system to defeat the system: "So to combat them you have got to have what they have that made them do what that man did. You got to have land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with" (238). The attack on the system from within is a noble cause, but Sutpen is too unaware of the dangers involved in such a full-fledged adoption of this system. He does not perceive himself as susceptible to the same evils that affected the man who turned him away at the door. As General Compson notes:

> Sutpen's trouble was innocence. All of a sudden he discovered, not what he wanted to do but what he just had to do, had to do it whether he wanted to or not, because if he did not do it he knew that he could never live with himself for the rest of his life, never live with what the men and women that had died to make him had left inside of him for him to pass on, with all the dead ones waiting and watching to see if he was going to do it right, fix

> things right so that he would be able to look in the face not only the old dead ones but all the living ones that would come after him when he would be one of the dead. And that at the very moment when he discovered what it was, he found out that this was the last thing in the world he was equipped to do because he not only had not known that he would have to do this, he did not even know that it existed to be wanted, to need to be done... (220)

This explains why the notion of posterity holds such a great appeal for Sutpen, why he feels he must construct something as large, and as seemingly inviolate, as Sutpen's Hundred. Yet in the very process of carrying out his design, as Olga Vickery points out, he loses sight of the original motivation behind its creation:

> His instinctive reaction is to believe that the behavior of the plantation owner as expressed through the Negro is wrong and inhuman. Yet his final decision betrays that instinctive reaction and he exchanges individual integrity for a handful of social concepts and conventions. His acceptance of circumstance or "luck" as the controlling factor in man's life is replaced by his worship of a man-made pattern; his primitive mountain ethics give way to what he believes to be the code of the South. (94)

Sutpen may "believe" he has adopted the code of the South, but his blind acceptance of its statutes leads him to an unnatural and inhuman interpretation of their essence and meaning.

At an early point in the novel, for example, Mr.Compson seeks to define for Quentin the quality that made Sutpen different from other men. He proposes that Sutpen believed he had successfully "learnt" the ways of the South, in the same manner one learns to dance. His ignorance of the fundamental value of these tenets (the reason for their existence) is evident, yet his assuredness, his complete rejection of the possibility of failure, prevents him from perceiving the flaws inherent in their composition:

> He may have believed that your grandfather or Judge Benbow might have done it a little more effortlessly than he, but he would not have believed that anyone could have beat him in knowing when to do it and how. And besides it was in his face: that was where his power lay, your grandfather said: that anyone could look at him and say, *Given the occasion and need, this man can and will do anything*. (46)

In this statement the reader is presented with the paradox that lies at the center of Sutpen's existence, and the cause of the eventual fall of the House of Sutpen. He believes that the strength of his convictions will allow him to negate a first marriage, impose his laws upon the people of Jefferson and the Coldfield family, and create a dynasty to fit his design. This

assuredness is best portrayed by Sutpen's "swagger" and the perpetual smile lurking within his beard. As Cleanth Brooks argues, Sutpen's behavior, as exhibited in his condescending attitude towards the townspeople, betrays his lack of understanding of the system he has adopted: "Sutpen's manners indicate his abstract approach to the whole matter of living. Sutpen would seize upon "the traditional" as a pure abstraction - which, of course, is to deny its very meaning..." (Faulkner, 298). Sutpen's flaw clearly arises from placing his design above any consideration for human emotions or frailty. He is willing to sacrifice friends and family to the pursuit of its success. Perhaps this is attributable, as Mr.Compson suggests, to Sutpen's awareness of the tenuousness of his dream; of the constant attention that the maintenance of such a design requires. Mr.Compson notes that Sutpen was:

> Not concerned: just watchful, like he must have been from the day when he turned his back upon all that he knew...set out into a world which even in theory he knew nothing about, and with a fixed goal in his mind which most men do not set up until the blood begins to slow at thirty or more and then only because the image represents peace and indolence or at least a crowning of vanity...that unsleeping care which must have known that it could permit itself but one mistake; that alertness for measuring event against eventuality, circumstance against human nature, his own fallible judgment and mortal clay against not only human but natural forces, choosing and discarding, compromising with his dream and his ambition like you must with a horse which you can take across country, over timber, which you control only through your ability to keep the animal from realizing that actually you cannot, that actually it is stronger. (53)

There is in this description something of the simple and amoral Sutpen that Mr.Compson creates for his narrative, but also of the hero who recognizes the Forces against which he has aligned himself. This characteristic can be interpreted as courage or foolhardiness, as any critic of tragedy well knows. Brooks argues, however, that if we are to understand Sutpen we must understand what is meant by "innocence":

> This is an "innocence" with which most of us today ought to be acquainted. It is par excellence the innocence of modern man, though it has not, to be sure, been confined to modern times. One can find more than a trace of it in Sophocles' Oedipus, and it has its analogies with the rather brittle rationalism of Macbeth, though Macbeth tried to learn his innocence by an act of will and proved to be a less than satisfactory pupil. But innocence of this sort can properly be claimed as a specific characteristic of modern man,

> and one can claim further that it flourishes particularly in a secularized society. (C. Brooks, Faulkner, 297)

Sutpen is the modern man who sees his misfortunes as simply "bad luck." He approaches his design with a rationale devoid of any type of spiritual or traditional belief. In this respect, he is the modern hero who considers elements beyond his person insignificant and merely instruments to be manipulated in the pursuit of his goal. As an outsider who uses the community to his advantage, Sutpen is similar to the Faulknerian archetypal villain, Flem Snopes. However, Brooks notes that, in contrast to Flem, Sutpen is "a heroic and tragic figure," one who "achieves a kind of grandeur" (C. Brooks, Faulkner, 307). He argues that Faulkner manages to endow Sutpen with some of the confidence and courage which tragic heroes of the past, such as Oedipus and Macbeth, possessed: "Perhaps the most praiseworthy aspect of Faulkner is his ability to create a character of heroic proportions and invest his downfall with something like tragic dignity. The feat is, in our times, sufficiently rare" (C. Brooks, Faulkner, 307). What we find in Thomas Sutpen is that strange mixture of ingredients which creates the tragic potential in the hero. He is a man clearly above the norm in a number of significant ways, but his makeup also causes him to be more vulnerable to an unforgiving Fate.

There is clearly something heroic in the image of the individual who struggles against insurmountable odds to achieve his desired ends. Lynn Levins, however, argues that this perception of Sutpen is only to be found in Mr.Compson's narrative:

> Thomas Sutpen - the Greek hero contending against his fellowman, his environment, and Fate itself - dares to attempt his design in defiance not only of society, but of eternity too. Because of the height of his fall and the courage in defiance against overwhelming odds, the Thomas Sutpen of Mr.Compson's perspective is able to arouse the pity absent in Rosa Coldfield's demon and the fear that Shreve's caricatured "hero" is incapable of eliciting; and his action thereby accomplishes the final catharsis necessary to Greek tragedy. (Heroic, 22)

Although Mr.Compson's "Sutpen" appears to be the most tragic of the hero's representations, it is Miss Rosa's "demonizing" that endows Sutpen with mythological qualities, while it is Shreve's ironic tone which serves to keep the legend human. As such, Sutpen can be seen as an amalgamation, an imaginative reconstruction, of the various

narratives. He grows in tragic stature as each layer of his person is uncovered, as Michael Millgate points out:

> Quentin had been brought up to think of Sutpen as probably a monomaniac and monster and as certainly an upstart and a danger to the established social order; but as the story develops Sutpen gradually assumes in Quentin's mind the shape and proportions of a tragic hero - a man of great personal power and splendid vision; a bold seeker after those material values which all the South, and all America, tacitly accepted as good, indeed as the essential criterion of "quality"; a brave fighter and leader in the struggle against the North; and ultimately a defeated and tragic figure only because of his rigid adherence to principles of racial and social inhumanity which many besides himself were pledged to uphold. (157)

As with Conrad's Jim, Sutpen's error arises from his failure to recognize the fallen state of man, which he must accept if his design is to succeed. His unequivocal adoption of the system of the South prevents him from rejecting it even when its full deficiencies are revealed. He must cling to it at all costs, even if the price is his own flesh and blood. This rigidity is a fault common in many of Faulkner's heroes as Olga Vickery points out: "Faulkner's doomed characters are those who lack the necessary flexibility and resilience to admit and mend their errors in perception. Those who survive and triumph are the ones who, unfettered by facts and uncommitted to legends, respond to the truth that is within them" (225).

Sutpen's quest for immortality, the creation of a dynasty that would outlast Time itself, can naturally be correlated with the antique sin of pride. It is the image of the individual who would impose a personal vision upon a chaotic world. In this manner, Sutpen shares certain similarities with the princes and kings of classical tragedy. Judith's image of the loom is a symbol of man's desire to stay the tides of Time. The act of giving Bon's letter to Mrs.Compson emphasizes Judith's hope that the significance of these events will not be forgotten by those who survive:

> Because you make so little impression, you see. You get born and you try this and you dont know why only you keep on trying it and you are born at the same time with a lot of other people, all mixed up with them, like trying to, having to, move your arms and legs with strings only the same strings are hitched to all the other arms and legs and the others all trying and they dont know why either except that the strings are all in one another's way like five or six people all trying to make a rug on the same loom only each

> one wants to weave his own pattern into the rug; and it cant matter, you know that, or the Ones that set up the loom would have arranged things a little better, and yet it must matter because you keep on trying, or having to, keep on trying and then all of a sudden its all over and all you have left is a block of stone with scratches on it provided there was someone to remember to have the marble scratched and set up or had time to, and it rains on it and the sun shines on it and after a while they dont even remember the name and what the scratches were trying to tell, and it doesn't matter. (127)

Is the mansion, the House of Sutpen, the hero's attempt to leave his pattern on the loom? Even the effort Sutpen exerts to ensure the arrival of the gravestones during the Civil War indicates a desire to perpetuate a tradition, and a wish to defeat human forgetfulness. What Judith's image implies, however, is the need for cooperation. And this points to one of Sutpen's faulty assumptions; that he bears no responsibility to others and that he will not subordinate his personal vision to the communal one, that no one really does.

The unattainability of Sutpen's dream is underscored by a number of scenes in the novel. The visit that Quentin and Mr.Compson make to the isolated and forgotten graveyard ironically undermines such hopes, and Rosa's engraved message upon Judith's stone, "Pause, Mortal, Remember Vanity and Folly and Beware," (211) warns against the dangers of subordinating love and compassion to the pursuit of glory. The scene that Quentin and Shreve create, portraying Sutpen and Wash in an afterworld having forgotten what all the fuss was about (Sutpen asks, "What was it, Wash? Something happened. What was it?" [186]), also denotes the ultimate inconsequentiality of human endeavor. The final image in the novel, now created by Shreve alone, is the most devastating in regards to Sutpen's design. He suggests that the sole survivors of the Sutpen saga will be the progeny of the idiot Jim Bond, and that they shall inherit the earth. The implication is that *Absalom, Absalom!* is, to some degree, a tale that will be told by an idiot signifying nothing.

Sutpen's plight is the tragedy of repetition. Caught within a cycle and recognizing the faults inherent in it, he is unwilling, and unable, to alter the chain of events he has unleashed. He reenacts the rejection he suffered as a youth, denying Bon any connection with his past. The tale is all the more tragic when one considers the number of situations which Bon creates in order to receive Sutpen's recognition. Ironically, Sutpen does not

perceive the degree to which his own pursuit of his design is a "mockery and a betrayal" of the oath he took so many years earlier:

> ...either I destroy my design with my own hand, which will happen if I am forced to play my last trump card, or do nothing, let matters take the course which I know they will take and see my design complete itself quite normally and naturally and successfully to the public eye, yet to my own in such a fashion as to be a mockery and a betrayal of that little boy who approached that door fifty years ago and was turned away, for whose vindication the whole plan was conceived and carried forward to the moment of this choice... (274)

It is at this moment that Sutpen comes closest to sensing his dilemma, to questioning the validity of his actions. The narratives of the novel, however, do not show him deliberating over the question with any real sense of doubt. One reads this statement as justification rather than misgiving. It is Sutpen's inability to reject his design, to grasp the opportunity and show compassion for an individual who may or may not be his first-born son, that seals the fate of the dynasty he wished to create.

Sutpen's ruthless rejection of Bon, however, is not the only example of his coldheartedness in the novel. His inhumanity is revealed on a number of other occasions, most particularly in his relationships with women. His pitiless, matter-of-fact abandonment of his first wife and the business-like manner in which he marries Ellen Coldfield both indicate his total unawareness of the significance of love in human relations. His blatantly opportunistic proposal to Rosa and his later treatment of Milly Jones, as though she was simply one more mare in his stable, also indicate the depths to which Sutpen subjugates any sense of human compassion in the frenzied pursuit of his design.

It is Sutpen's treatment of Wash, though, that leads to the most pathetic moments in the novel. As Wash slowly begins to realize that the god he has created for himself is in fact closer to a demon, his whole world comes crashing down around him. Wash's image of Sutpen is heavenly: "*A fine proud man. If God himself was to come down and ride the natural earth, that's what he would aim to look like* " (282). With such a conception in his mind, it is only natural that Sutpen should one day fall short in Wash's estimation. Yet even after losing the war and being reduced to selling ribbons and beads in a roadside store to survive, Sutpen remains the ideal embodiment of man for Wash Jones. It is only when

Sutpen exhibits total disrespect for both Wash and his granddaughter that the tide irrevocably turns. For even up to that final instant before Sutpen insults Milly, Wash still believes that he and the 'Kernel' will one day accomplish great deeds. It is only after the decapitation of Sutpen, when Wash fulfills his role as the Creditor's bailiff, that he begins to envision the tragedy of his own life and perhaps of the entire South:

> Better if his kind and mine too had never drawn the breath of life on this earth. Better that all who remain of us be blasted from the face of it than that another Wash Jones should see his whole life shredded from him and shrivel away like a dried shuck thrown onto the fire. (290-1)

That Thomas Sutpen goes to his death clearly unenlightened as to the reasons for his downfall is often upheld as the primary reason for his not attaining tragic stature. As Richard Sewall notes: "How real he felt his dilemma to be, to what extent it opened up for him those dark areas of the soul which tragic heroes know, we are not told" (142). Having survived the war, the dramatic dissolution of his family, and the crumbling of his dynasty, Sutpen never voices any doubts or questions about his condition. He sits by the roadside selling beads and ribbons with Wash Jones, seemingly unaware of the way things might have been.

The concept of an unconscious hero is a difficult one to accept for the reader who seeks a sense of completion in the novel. One critic, for example, exhibits this very desire when he suggests: "Though I have no text to help me, I can imagine that when Thomas Sutpen lay alongside trash like Milly Jones, his anagnorisis was so intense and desperate that he refused to think it aloud for somebody to relate" (Vogel, 76). This argument endows the figure of Sutpen with far more complexity than is actually at his disposal. Also from a critical standpoint, it is what one would label inadmissible evidence. Vogel exhibits a wish for closure in the novel that is not grounded on any textual reading but in his own perceptions and expectations of the tragic form.

The essential question in any reading of *Absalom* thus becomes the identification of the locus of tragedy in the novel. A number of critics have based their conclusions merely on their assessment of Sutpen as tragic hero. Lynn G. Levins, for example, argues Sutpen does not attain tragic awareness but does gain some sense of his failure, managing to reassert his heroic stature in his final moments: "Nevertheless at the moment of his death Sutpen's heroic

stature is reaffirmed. Although he never recognizes the reason for the failure of the design, he does realize the fact of failure. This recognition prompts him to give the fatal insult to Milly, by which he succeeds in taunting Jones into killing him" (44). This reading also endows Sutpen with a degree of awareness that he never openly demonstrates in the novel. Sutpen's insult to Milly and Wash Jones can more easily be interpreted as ignorance of the power of human contact and self-esteem. Much in the same manner that he proposes to marry Rosa if she will bear him a boy-child, Sutpen remains until the end insensitive to the compassion and understanding he should demonstrate toward the people in his life.

It can thus be concluded that Sutpen never experiences self-recognition. In classical tragedy, such a hero would be called something less than tragic. Faulkner's novel, however, demands to be interpreted in a different context - it must be read as modern tragedy, one of tragic idea rather than action. Like Lord Jim, Sutpen, as tragic instigator, unleashes events but remains oblivious to their significance on a higher plane. Such discoveries are reserved for those who would observe and apply their perceptions to their own particular circumstances. As Brooks suggests:

> It is man's fate to struggle against nature; yet it is his wisdom to learn that the fight cannot finally be won, and that the contest has to be conducted with love and humility and in accordance with a code of honor. Man realizes himself in the struggle; but the ultimate to be gained in the struggle is wisdom. Sutpen never really acquires wisdom, for he never loses his innocence. He will never learn. The figure of Time with his scythe never received a more grim embodiment than it does in the grizzled Wash Jones raising his rusty implement to strike Sutpen down. (C. Brooks, Faulkner, 308)

In Faulkner's tragic fiction, we must accept that the role of the hero has undergone some fundamental changes - he must be perceived as only one component of the tragic cycle. Dinnah Pladott, for example, suggests the seeds of Faulknerian tragedy are to be uncovered within the dynamics of the relationship between instigator and observer. Taking her cue from Northrop Frye, she posits that Faulkner creates "low-mimetic" or "ironic" modes of tragedy. Under such conditions, the hero takes on tragic stature by virtue of his inarticulateness, his (self-imposed) isolation from the community, his sense of lost direction, and finally his lack of self-knowledge. She proposes that Faulkner's tragic protagonists:

> ...are blinded and deluded by an artificial *hamartia*. This *hamartia* leads them to accept unquestioningly, as their natural state, their isolation and exclusion from all human love and companionship. Consequently, their freedom of action and their capacity for self-realization are severely reduced. Such "low-mimetic" and "ironic" tragic figures are barred from experiencing any form of illumination: their circumscribed capacities constitute the very crux of their tragedy. Only a "thematic" discovery of *anagnorisis*, a generous and amorphous understanding ...is attainable in such tragedies...but it is reserved for the reader or audience. (100)

Taking these notions into account, we can see Sutpen as the modern tragic hero whose actions serve to awaken tragic awareness in others. It is the simplicity, their very lack of complexity, that allows men, such as Sutpen and Jim, to act where a more self-conscious individual would be inhibited by his own thoughts.

The tragedy of *Absalom, Absalom!* is that despite man's best efforts and noblest intentions, the probability of failure is assured and irrevocable. [15] Sutpen thus goes to his death having repeated the error common to many tragic heroes. He has fallen prey to the illusion that *he* is different, that he can wilfully control his destiny and any variable that might impinge upon it, ignoring the truths about his existence and the human condition that are revealed in the process. Such a figure, while initiating the tragic action and eliciting the repercussions it entails, cannot be seen as the receptacle of the entire tragedy.

In reviewing the modern tragic novel, then, a pattern clearly begins to emerge. Much like his classical predecessors, the modern hero is an individual fully confident of his abilities to accomplish his goals. And like them, he is the figure who unleashes the tragic action, suffering the repercussions. Unlike them, however, he is destroyed having never experienced the recognition or illumination that comes to an Oedipus or a Hamlet. The downward spiral in which he performs his actions prevents the acquisition of knowledge that would allow the hero to create a context in which to visualize the meaning of his existence. When Dorothy Van Ghent suggests that "Moral isolation provides a new inflection on tragedy," she is pointing to the void in which the modern hero performs his actions. In a similar vein, Murray Krieger notes that the hero is often distinguished from others by his "identification with an ethical absolute." The hero adopts a virtue and maintains it relentlessly, blinding himself to the consequences of his actions in the process. Ahab's hatred of the whale, Jim's idealized concept of self, and Sutpen's design, are all

concepts built upon static principles that cannot be maintained in an irrational, and continually shifting, universe. As Krieger suggests in reference to the hero's destruction:

> In acting and in assuring himself of the absolute integrity of his action (without which assurance he would not act), he is making two crucial - and fatal - assumptions: first, that his single ethical set of beliefs is necessarily adequate - that is, totally responsive - to the moral problem at hand in its full complexity and, secondly, that he personally is utterly disinterested and thus capable of utterly selfless action in the service of a universal ethical claim. (Tragic, 261)

The hero is destroyed because he fails to accept the fallen state of man, and his own place within this continuum. If he could perceive human failure as an irrefutable fact (his own, included), he would not be caught unaware by those forces that prey upon human weakness.

In the modern tragic hero failure is an incontrovertible fact, and compensation or reconciliation do not come to him. We have noted elsewhere the skepticism with which the modern reader approaches the hero in the tragic novel. This sensibility is often compounded by the distinct lack of sympathy the reader feels for the hero. Ahab's monomania, Jim's enslavement to his imagination, and Sutpen's ruthless pursuit of his design, are all traits that alienate the reader from the hero. In the modern novel the protagonist is often cast in an ironic light, causing a rift to grow between the reader's empathy and the hero's quest. We are made aware of the unbridgeable gap that exists between the hero's idealized concepts and the probable reality.

It is safe to conclude that both Conrad and Faulkner intended the narration of their novels to be perceived as ironic. The omniscient narrator in the opening chapters serves to set the tone for the remainder of *Lord Jim*, and Marlow's assertive narration is frequently undermined by it. In *Absalom, Absalom!* Shreve's playful, ironic tone is intended to keep Quentin's recreation of events in check. But what role does irony finally play in tragedy? Does it not allow us to perceive the hero as fallible, and thus human? In becoming increasingly less god-like, does the hero not become more representative of the reader ? [16]

In sharp contrast to the hero, we are aware of that quality that will lead to his undoing. This blindness in regards to the self is a fault characteristic of all three heroes. They impose their own stamp upon the world in an attempt to negate the unknown and illogical powers therein. Whether it be the White Whale, the Dark Forces, or the Creditor, however, each

hero ultimately succumbs to that thing over which he would exercise his will. Thus, we see the tragic hero defined by the greatness of his passion, by the desire and strength he invests in the pursuit of his dream. In other words, the hero distinguishes himself from his fellow men by the intensity of his purpose. The fact that he concentrates his attention upon an 'absolute' allows him to channel his energy, both physical and psychic, in a manner unavailable to the ordinary individual. But this passion is not one that can be expressed in thoughts or words; it requires physical action. Of the hero's intensity, Henry Myers notes: "In itself it is without moral significance, for the unyielding hero may be either a saint or a sinner in the eyes of the spectator. But unyielding character is the spring from which heroic and dramatic actions flow" (135). [17] The very energy required to perform such actions often incapacitates the hero in his ability to contemplate his situation. Also such experiences often entail revelations of such magnitude that they are not translatable into language (one need only think of Kurtz's "the horror"). The growth of this gap - an expanding subjectivity that isolates the hero at an ever-increasing distance from the reader - necessitates a stronger emphasis on the choric figure. The narrator becomes the vehicle through which we relate to the hero's experience, and it is his understanding of events, subjective and faulty as they may be, that leads us to delve into the darkness of our own souls.

Thus, we perceive the modern tragic hero as a figure whose extremity, both in deed and perspective, serves to isolate him from the community. In the pursuit of his goal, he places himself in situations where the revelations afforded could illuminate the mysteries of his existence. But, having chosen this path, Kawin suggests that the "metaphysical hero" often loses his ability to describe his experience with any clarity or objectivity. As such the hero is seen as:

> ...a figure who has so closely touched these mysteries that he can be said (from the perspective of the apprentice) to have joined them, a prophet who has so unequivocally launched himself into the silence that he cannot tell the whole of his story but can at best encourage a kindred spirit to follow him and thus find out the heart of that story for himself. (Kawin, 36)

This is the dynamic most frequently witnessed in the tragic novel. If Jim's story was presented from Jim's point of view (as it is in chapters nine through eleven in *Lord Jim*), we would be in the presence of a far different tale - Jim's story would be one of a romantic

figure victimized by the Uncaring Powers, and it would not be tragedy. Why must Leverkühn's life in Mann's *Doctor Faustus* be recounted by Zeitblom? For the simple reason that we must not perceive his death and destruction as merely the fall of a proud and arrogant artist. In Kawin's opinion the presence of this choric figure often serves to temper our opinion of the hero, and acts as a medium through which the hero's vision can be partially communicated to the outside world: "The story of his initiation provides a dramatic context through which the reader can comprehend or imagine the richer but less precisely described vision of the hero. Conversely, the presence of the hero makes it unnecessary to limit the range of the tale to a conventionally apprehensible level." (146) While sufficiently explaining the dynamics of choric narration, Kawin's analysis is reductive. His presumption is that the hero experiences illumination but remains unable to express it implies that the hero's experience occurs on a higher level than that of the observer. Modern tragedy, however, seeks to give a far more diffuse and wider display of the chaotic vision. The choric narrator's experience is a corollary to the tragic hero's, and thus must be interpreted on an equal footing. It is only through a simultaneous understanding of the hero's experience (action) *and* the narrator's recognition (idea) that we can arrive at a reconciliation of the tragedy. A fuller understanding of this dynamic is the objective of the following chapter.

Endnotes

1. Those features which serve to set the hero apart from the community, however, should not be interpreted as evidence for the theory of the tragic flaw. For far too long, emphasis has been placed upon the tragic flaw as the principal reason for the hero's downfall, and has

often clouded what the tragic writer set out to accomplish. It is often true of twentieth century fiction that the hero is "guilty" of some crime or another. However, the fact that the hero is labelled as criminal by the community in which he exists, does not necessitate a moral judgment on the part of the reader. As David Lenson notes: "Aristotle's *hamartia* has been used all too often to preserve traditional notions of propriety *against those of the tragic heroes*. It is hard to see how it can be of any use to a critic or reader who desires to experience tragedy in its unadulterated form" (165). The tragic flaw is often perceived as the weapon of Poetic Justice, as the means by which the powers drag the hero down. The legal world of courts and judges is a dominating presence in modern tragedy. Novels such as *The Scarlet Letter*, *Lord Jim*, and *The Trial*, all underline the effect of the community's judgment upon the hero. What we must perceive is that the criminal act is often the author's only means of placing his hero in an extreme or "boundary-situation," to employ Jaspers's terminology. See also Sewall, who argues: "It is said that the great tragedies deal with the great eccentrics and offenders, the God-defiers, the murderers, the adulterers. But it is not tragedy's primary concern to establish the moral truth or the sociological meaning of the hero's action. It is the orthodox world, and not the tragic artist, which judges (or prejudges) a Job or an Oedipus, a Faustus or a Hester Prynne. To bring his protagonist swiftly to the point of ultimate test, the artist imagines a deed which violently challenges the accepted social and (it may be) legal ways. Hence the fact that tragic heroes are often criminals in the eyes of society, and hence the frequency of the legal trial as a symbolic situation in tragedy from Aeschylus to Dostoevski and Kafka" (61-2).

2. It is generally accepted that the tragic hero must be representative of mankind and yet possess some characteristic tying him to the gods. Northrop Frye explains the relationship with the following image: "Tragic heroes are so much the highest points in their human landscape that they seem the inevitable conductors of the powers about them, great trees more likely to be struck by lightning than a clump of grass" (207). See also Dorothea Krook who states of the hero: "He is all mankind: representative of all humanity in embodying some fundamental, persistent aspect of man's nature; in meeting his representative situation with the recognizable equipment of a human being - what the older moralists called the fundamental human passions and the power of human reason; and in showing in his suffering and his knowledge the necessary common ground with his fellow creatures to make these truly exemplary and instructive... the tragic hero must *not* be representative in another sense. He must not be the average man... What he represents is the furthest reach of human possibility... Thus, paradoxically, the hero in tragedy is representative of all humanity by being exceedingly unlike common humanity" (36-7).

3. Albert Guerard, in *The Triumph of the Novel*, suggests a theory of "paradoxical sympathies" whereby the author wishes to create believable characters but also endow them with attractive qualities. It might be said that though these characters do not "engender our good will" they nonetheless possess one (or two) characteristics with which we readily identify and which makes it impossible to dismiss them. Fyodor Karamazov's love of life, Jim's quest for honor, Ahab's identification of the universal in the particular, or Emma Bovary's (albeit limited) struggle against ennui and the suppression of her imaginative spirit, are all examples of this quality. Macbeth, Ahab, and Sutpen, as tragic heroes, however,

tend to pose a greater difficulty for the audience, for they exhibit a very distinct lack of love or affection for their fellow men.

4. See Murray Krieger (Tragic, 13-20).

5. For a similar viewpoint see Henry James's Preface to *The Princess Cassamassima.*

6. Lenson notes of Ishmael: "His feeling for Queequeg is the only vital and candid affection in the whole book." (57) Can we not ask whether human compassion, pity, and understanding are not required faculties of the choric figure? Marlow attempting to understand Jim where others would rather forget, Zeitblom's friendship with the otherwise arrogant Leverkühn, or Nick Carraway seeing below the surface of Gatsby's persona, to the turmoil within? Ishmael's relationship with Queequeg is the only instance in *Moby-Dick* where a sense of human affection is visibly present. One wonders whether it is not such a friendship that prevents Ishmael from turning his sense of isolation to the desolation felt by Ahab - as Ishmael himself recognizes: "I felt a melting in me. No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it" (50).

7. See also Guerard (*Conrad...*,128), and Seltzer (85).

8. Harry Epstein, for example, sees Jim's imagination, his ability to conceive an idealized conception of self, as the trait which separates him from the common man: "If Jim is weaker because of his imagination, he is also finer, more human, and more interesting. He is also, and this becomes crucial as the novel progresses, capable of more intense suffering" (Epstein, 237). We should be careful, however, not to confuse imagination with self-knowledge; and this is precisely what Epstein has done.

9. For an examination of the role of repetition in *Lord Jim*, see the second chapter of J.Hillis Miller's *Fiction and Repetition.*

10. See, for example, Van Ghent (231).

11. See Alvin Greenberg, who compares Jim with Camus's notion of the absurdist hero: "The darkness which Jim finally comprehends is the darkness...of the self's hidden interior; and if Jim's consciousness of this self is tragic, in Camus' sense, such tragedy offers an ennobling crown to man's inherent absurdity" (16). Or John Batchelor who perceives similarities between Jim and Christ: "The novel is both an elegy and a gospel; a legendary figure of supreme worth has sacrificed himself for the good of his community - the comparisons between Jim and Christ often become explicit - and a dead friend demands to be lovingly recalled in the (as it transpires, vain) hope that his personality can be understood in retrospect as it was not in life" (86). Both of these readings of *Lord Jim* reveal more about the critic's desire than they do about Conrad's novel.

12. See *Faulkner in the University* : "But the old man was himself a little too big for people no greater in stature than Quentin and Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson to see all at once. It

would have taken perhaps a wiser or more tolerant or more sensitive or more thoughtful person to see him as he was" (273-4).

See also Wash's impression of Sutpen: "He is bigger than all them Yankees that killed us and ourn, that killed his wife and widowed his daughter and druv his son from home, that stole his niggers and ruined his land; bigger than this whole country that he fit for and in payment for which has brung him to keeping a little country store for his bread and meat; bigger than the scorn and denial which it helt to his lips like the bitter cup in the Book" (287).

13. Donald Kartiganer notes of Sutpen's recounting of events to General Compson: "It is the strangest tale of all, eventful and yet oddly irrelevant, for there is no one in the novel less capable than Sutpen of understanding what has happened to him" (87-8).

14. This technique is reminiscent of the one used by Faulkner in *Light in August*. Joe Christmas is first portrayed as the man responsible for the gruesome murder of Joanna Burden, and only subsequently are we presented the arduous steps that have led him up the road of his life. Also see Longley: " In some ways the discovery of what Sutpen was follows the classic pattern of thesis, antithesis, synthesis" (210).

15. See Michael Boyd who suggests: "Sutpen is certainly viewing the design from a secular point of view by refusing to consider it in terms of good and evil, and by refusing to see its defeat as a form of retribution. His belief in the power of the mind or imagination to master the world is also a rejection of the irrational forces of life. All designs and recipes are abstractions of human invention; Sutpen's design fails not because it was "wrong," but because, like any other mental construct, it must fail. Finally, Sutpen is not the fully secularized man, because while he would reject the old myths, he would still retain the belief in the power of myths to control and pattern our lives. There is finally some truth in Miss Rosa's demonizing, for like Satan, Sutpen would possess God's creative power but forgets that only the dreams of the gods are real" (74). See also Conrad's *Nostromo* : "There was something inherent in the necessities of successful action which carried with it the moral degradation of the idea" (427).

16. For example, the implicit demand for a second reading which is often the objective of the impressionist novel (as Guerard has so aptly pointed out) permits the reader to view events with a foreknowledge unavailable to the hero, thus investing the reader with a certain sense of superiority. On a second reading, we see Jim jump ship and defend himself at the Inquiry, fully aware that the Patna did not sink. We hear of Sutpen's grand design, of his seemingly effortless construction of Sutpen's Hundred, knowing that it is all for naught. While providing the reader with an advantage over the hero, this foreknowledge also serves to remind us that we are not exempt from such blindness ourselves.

17. See also Raphael (196) and Omesco (69) for opposing views on the "grandeur d'âme" debate.

CHAPTER THREE: THE CHORIC FIGURE IN THE TRAGIC NOVEL

That the hero not attain complete self-awareness is, paradoxically, an inherent characteristic of the tragic condition. Tragedy arises out of mankind's recognition of the unbridgeable gap between one's ideals and the dreaded reality. The hero of modern tragedy is in fact often destroyed before gaining any insight at all into his situation. The modern demand for more realism, for a more direct correspondence between fiction and real life - a reaction against the 'false' formal harmony of tragedy - has dispersed the source of recognition in the tragic text. It is no longer necessarily the property of the hero. In response to the interrogative mode of tragedy and the growing relativism and subjectivity that surrounds the modern hero, the emphasis has shifted to a character who fulfills choric responsibilities within the text. It is often this figure who undertakes to ask the questions that the hero's actions have raised and interpret whatever answers await. This chapter will elaborate on the role this figure has come to play in modern conceptions of tragedy.

According to George Boas, the Chorus afforded the Greek tragedians the means of articulating, or implying, the greater truths that evaded the limited vision of the tragic agent: "The various immutable principles are often presented to us by the Chorus as if it were important for the audience to know what the plays are really about. The laws are what matter, not the desires of the individuals" (121). Thus the very existence of a Chorus stresses the need to look beyond the conflict presented in the text to the greater issues it attempts to address. The hero is often so immersed in his specific situation that he is unable to grasp the larger significance of his actions. If higher knowledge is to be acquired under such circumstances it must come to some other actor in the drama - one further removed from the actions. Our modern skepticism about heroic capabilities makes the creation of a choric figure who sees more clearly than the hero a necessary and natural one.

It must be noted that the presence of the choric figure does not replace the active function fulfilled by the hero in the tragic text. As we have seen, it is still the hero's

intensity, his desire, which sets the tragic spring in motion. The choric figure's narrative often serves simply as the backdrop against which the hero's fate is played out. The choric figure is a barometer through which the reader may gauge the effect and significance of the hero's actions within the latter's self-enclosed universe. The role is not a moralizing one; neither Ishmael, Marlow, or Quentin "judge" the actions of the men they describe. Rather, the choric commentary is the tragedian's means of placing the hero's single-minded dedication to an idea within a communal context. The choric figure is endowed with a sense of rationalism the hero never shares. He is able to distance himself from events in a manner that is impossible for the hero to conceive, both physically and spiritually. It is, of course, only natural that the choric figure is occasionally swept up in the fervor of the hero (after all, he is our link to the tragic experience), but his ability to detach himself from it, to think it out, makes this character an entirely different individual from the hero.

In attempting to understand the fate of the tragic instigator, the choric man acts as a type of mediator between ourselves and the extremity of the hero. He is not usually asked to contend directly with the experiences of the tragic hero and often, much like the reader, comes to his conclusions solely through the use of mental processes. Consequently, he is not destroyed for this activity and is able to view quietly the unravelling of the tragic spring, unlike the hero who is trapped within the subjectivity of his cause. The equation might be seen as proportional. The chorus, or choric man, experiences more when the hero is least self-conscious and less when the hero is more. There is clearly a spectrum to be perceived here, with the entirely introspective hero at one end (Hamlet, for instance) and a hero who does not manage to articulate any recognition of his condition at the other (Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!*). It stands to reason that if a work contains the latter form of hero, then the knowledge hinted at in his fate must necessarily spring up elsewhere.

The Greek Chorus disappeared by the time of the Renaissance, but there are clearly choric figures to be found in Shakespeare's tragedies: Horatio in *Hamlet*, Kent or the Fool in *King Lear*, for example. They serve to reflect on the hero's actions, to voice viewpoints other than those shared by the major protagonists. Yet they also embody the general reluctance of common humanity before endeavours such as those undertaken by the tragic hero. As Hamlet contemplates Yorick's skull, plumbing deeper and deeper into the dark

recesses of his soul, Horatio's response to the prince's musings represents the moderate character of the choric figure:

'Twere to consider too curiously, to consider so. (V,i, l.199)

The Chorus, or choric figure, acts as the stabilizing factor within the tragedy. David Lenson notes the choric narrative "is always the song of home. It is the song of comfort and stability in a heroic or pseudo-heroic world of commitment to the outlands and faraway struggles of the world" (129). Both Horatio and Kent, affected by the deaths of their friends and masters, offer a different "consideration" of the events. It is they who shall perpetuate the tales of these tragic men, as Horatio surely recounts the events of Hamlet's destruction to Fortinbras after the close of the play. Lenson notes the specific function these choric figures serve:

> For just as genuine tragedy never shows us loss without compensation, so too it never shows heroism without the source - and alternative - of that heroism. Mankind is numerous, both across space and across time. That rarest of human creatures, a tragic hero, is at once a delegate from and rebel against that multiplicity. He is not superhuman, but human in some exceptional way. To show him alone, as if he had arrived at his radical position *ex nihilo*, is necessarily to diminish his relationship with the audience that perceives him. Then all we have is a literary sort of freak show. The choric part of tragedy is the part that fills in the gap between the extremes, and holds them in the kind of tension that binds - and separates - the earth and the moon. (135-6)

As such, the choric figure bridges the gap between the multiplicity of the community and the rarity of the tragic hero. There is, however, a significant difference between the choric figure of Shakespearean drama and his counterpart in the novel. The former is rarely given the opportunity to express his interpretation of events. The choric figure of the tragic novel, on the other hand, acts as an encapsulating consciousness endowing the events with a certain logic and reason. But keeping in mind that this is tragedy such efforts rarely meet with success.

This division between tragic agent and choric figure represents the split between tragic action and tragic awareness. Just as the tragic agent cannot comment on his own action, the choric figure, ensnared in his own contemplative state, cannot act. Karl Jaspers, for

example, notes that tragedy is far more than the individual remarking the transitory and irrevocable circumstances of his existence:

> Genuine awareness of the tragic, on the contrary, is more than mere contemplation of suffering and death, flux and extinction. If these things are to become tragic, man must act. It is only then, through his own actions, that man enters into the tragic involvement that inevitably must destroy him. What will be ruined here is not merely man's life as concrete existence, but every concrete embodiment of whatever perfection he sought. Man's mind breaks down in the very wealth of its potentialities. Every one of these potentialities, as it becomes fulfilled, provokes and reaps disaster. (42)

The tragedy resides in the fact that the closer the hero comes to perfection, or to achieving his goal, the nearer he is to destruction. The individual may visualize his potential, but it is only through action that his existence becomes truly tragic. Jaspers argues this is the goal of the tragic poet: the creation of a dialectic between truth and reality, between the superficial meaning and the deeper significance of a conflict. He suggests "the poet sees farther and deeper. It is his task to render tragic knowledge visible, and all these limited realities serve him merely as raw material. Through this raw material he points out what is truly at issue in this conflict" (47). Jaspers points to the dialectic between the physical and psychological facets of the conflict. This contrast has been exploited by the modern writer who conveys the existence of this gap through the presence of the choric figure. Having taken this situation into account Jaspers concludes:

> The conflict is now understood according to the interpretations of the antagonists, or of the poet and, through him, the spectator. These interpretations of the battle are themselves realities. For significance so uncovered has always generated the strongest motive power. (47)

Thus the choric figure, while unable to act, plays a pivotal role in the completion of the tragic cycle. The hero is too entangled within his own struggle to grasp the significance of his actions, but the interpretations of the struggle are as central to the tragedy as the struggle itself.

The choric figure is a spectator, but one who bridges the distance between the action of the text and the reader. One can also see the choric figure as a representative of the reader or audience, as he or she acts similarly to the way we would in a similar situation. [1] Geoffrey

Brereton uncovers one facet of the Chorus's role when he states: "...the comments of the Chorus underline the exploratory nature of the plays. The Chorus are generally in the dark and when they draw conclusions these often have to be revised as the action proceeds. They are nearer to observers attempting to interpret an unfinished experiment than to all-knowing spectators" (116). If we grant such a function to the Chorus, then we may perceive it as an embodiment of man's mental capacities. Much like the reader, the Chorus is afforded the luxury of sitting back and analyzing the action as it unfolds. The choric figure thus acts as an interpreter or a mediator of the action for those who exist outside the text. His very existence implies or conveys the spiritual side of the conflict. His interpretation of events emphasizes the existence of a spiritual reality, for his viewpoint often expounds whatever truths are to be derived after the termination of the conflict.

The relationship between the tragic hero and the choric figure is one coloured by irony. The choric narrative, in assimilating the tragic experience, intimates the existence of something greater. The formal harmony of the choric structure points to a system that may encompass our own. When Krook speaks of the gap in the hero's knowledge, she is referring to the disparity between the hero's truth and the higher truth implicit in the tragic form. The hero's story is true as he sees it, but there is a larger truth that encompasses and is, ultimately, opposed to it. The choric narrative serves as the means to underline this dialectic. The choric figure pulled from the safety of his position finds himself compelled to interpret the events to the best of his ability. In the tragic novel, the choric narrative is one more system (a verbal one in contrast to the hero's physical one) mirroring a greater network of systems. [2]

The hero often feels provoked to launch his voice and his will against something higher and greater than himself. In order to do so his words must convey the drama and extremity of his situation - to rebel against the infinite is to speak in a language uncommon to the masses. Thus it is that the hero is often perceived as mad, or at least tainted by a touch of madness. Hamlet, Lear, Ivan, and Ahab, all experience moments when they speak a language incomprehensible to others. The choric figure is in touch with the tragic experience but at a distance which allows him to "translate" and make this language intelligible. [3] The role of the Chorus is to draw the reader/audience into the drama; it is a familiar voice to

which we cling as we stare into the unknown. In his introduction to *The Theban Plays*, E.F.Watling states: "The tragedy, whatever its subject, is *our* tragedy. We, like the Chorus, are both in it and spectators of it. But the tragedy is not fully played out, the story not fully told, until we have looked the whole matter squarely in the face and commented on it, so far as lies in us, truthfully, impartially, without passion, bias, or self-deception" (11). The concluding sentence is an intriguing one for it suggests that the search for the truth must extend beyond the hero, or even the choric figure, to ourselves. He argues that we should attempt to acknowledge those dark truths revealed in the text as best we can, and in this manner, aid in the "completion" of the tragic cycle.

The growing emphasis on tragedy as *idea*, rather than completed action, has meant that the choric figure has taken on a greater significance in the tragic text. *Moby-Dick*, *Lord Jim*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* demonstrate this progression - from Ishmael's reconciliatory role to Marlow's grappling with the questions inherent in Jim's plight to Quentin's full "adoption" of the hero's tragedy. It is the intention of this chapter to examine this dynamic.

In *The Vision of Tragedy*, Richard Sewall claims that both Hawthorne and Melville were concerned that the atmosphere of their novels would be too dire and relentless for their reading public. Sewall suggests that the Custom House section of *The Scarlet Letter* was Hawthorne's method of anticipating and alleviating the tragic tension of the novel, and argues the presence of Ishmael serves a similar function in *Moby-Dick*. As narrator, Ishmael's presence is felt far more strongly in the opening chapters of the novel as he prepares the reader for the appearance of Ahab. There have been a number of theories concerning the sharp contrast between the opening chapters and the ending of *Moby-Dick*. It has been thought that Melville set out to write a novel similar to his earlier seafaring works, *Typee* and *Mardi*, but was diverted at a certain stage by his reading of Shakespeare and his interaction with his neighbour, Hawthorne. It is now generally accepted, however, that the opening chapters, with their loose and comic tone, act as preparation for the darker introspective chapters that follow the appearance of Ahab. Whichever it may be, Ishmael's easy tone soon gives way to the tension created by Ahab's presence in the novel. Under such circumstances tragedy is seen as a peeling away of the layers standing between us and the hard core of tragic truth. The reader watches as Ishmael's optimism is slowly washed

away: "The rest of his story shows how shallow his optimism was, as Melville leads him (and the untragic American audience) by slow degrees, but remorselessly, toward tragic truth" (Sewall, 93). Ishmael personifies our own innate resistance to the tragic reality of our lives, and his experience enlightens us to our own avoidance of such truths.

The opening of the novel, "Loomings," is a paradoxical introduction to the narrator, a chapter whose very title conveys a sense of foreboding to the reader. Much has been written on the imperative introduction "Call me Ishmael," and the ambiguity that resides in such a statement. Is this the narrator's true name or merely a disguise? As one critic sees it, the reader "is invited to share an experience with someone who apparently, for reasons of his own, has chosen to conceal his identity behind an unlikely Biblical pseudonym" (Dryden, 85).[4] Thus, the reader is already full of queries concerning the narrator, and is then presented with a continual shifting of tenses which points out a marked distinction between Ishmael the narrator (who tells the tale) and Ishmael the character (who lived the tale).

Ishmael's younger self is clearly meant to be perceived as an optimistic individual who differs considerably from the wiser, and more experienced, narrator who recounts his adventures. On second reading, one perceives a certain ironic detachment between the narrator and his younger self. When Ishmael states, for example, "Not ignoring what is good, I am quick to perceive a horror, and could still be social with it - would they let me - since it is well to be on friendly terms with all inmates of the place one lodges in" (6), it is clear to the reader this is an individual who has not yet encountered the frenzy of Captain Ahab or the natural, indifferent power of Moby Dick.

There is clearly a paradoxical side to Ishmael's narration. While it is his role, as authorial voice, to gain the reader's confidence, he is also willing to admit to the existence of the darker side of his nature. One is immediately struck, for example, by the narrator's position as an outsider - an isolated individual whose tempers are only assuaged by a life at sea:

> Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly, November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from

> deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off - then I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. (1)

Ishmael is clearly a man who must grapple with his dark humors: an aspect of his character that will compel him to sympathize with Ahab's cause. [5] And yet he also demonstrates a pragmatic approach to life. He knows what must be done, understands himself well enough, and sets about doing it. He fights off suicidal thoughts, or any deep contemplations of death, by quietly taking to ship.

Melville carefully sets about creating sympathetic attachment between his narrator and the reader. After all, Ishmael is to be our guide and reference point during the fatal voyage of the Pequod. Ishmael has identified himself as a man of contradictions, insisting at the same time that he be accepted as one of us. As A. Robert Lee notes: "He speaks a language of rich ambivalence, of quick-witted asides. This story, he asserts, will be his story and, so his winkings, beckonings and signals to the reader suggest, ours" (111). The opening chapter is a magnificent piece of manipulation through which Ishmael, by virtue of confessional and imaginative means, manages to elicit the reader's full cooperation. By the end of the chapter, we have become fellow travellers - on the sea and in his imagination.

A sense of anticipation is clearly felt in the shore section of the novel (chapters 1 to 21). This is a product of the reader's expectations concerning the voyage, but also a result of Ishmael's pointing out the various omens along his path. He continually demonstrates, however, his ability to extract the duality of each observation and to situate it within the natural world. He even manages to rationalize Elijah's bleak prophesies and the sense of foreboding instilled in him by Peleg's description of Ahab:

> As I walked away, I was full of thoughtfulness; what had been incidentally revealed to me of Captain Ahab, filled me with a certain wild vagueness of painfulness concerning him. And somehow, at the time, I felt a sympathy and a sorrow for him , but for I don't know what, unless it was the cruel loss of his leg. And yet I also felt a strange awe of him; but that sort of awe, which I cannot at all describe, was not exactly awe; I do not know what it was. But I felt it; and it did not disincline me towards him; though I felt impatience at what seemed like mystery in him, so imperfectly as he was known to me then. (81)

This is the first indication offered the reader that Ishmael is intrigued by, and somewhat sympathetic to, Ahab. The feelings which he juxtaposes - "a certain wild vagueness of

painfulness," "a sympathy and a sorrow," and "awe" - point to the turbulence in Ishmael's heart and mind when confronted with the tragic existence of Ahab. The emotions he feels are not dissimilar to the pity and fear experienced by the audience who beholds the tragic spectacle. In keeping with his character, Ishmael shall be tossed from one sentiment to the other throughout his voyage on the Pequod.

The reader's anticipatory state mirrors Ishmael's, as each awaits the appearance of Ahab. Melville delays his protagonist's appearance until we feel prepared for it, yet still we share Ishmael's surprise: "Reality outran apprehension; Captain Ahab stood upon the quarter-deck" (120). Sewall points out that Melville, shortly before Ishmael's first encounter with Ahab, shifts from the narrative mode to the dramatic: "It is as if he were confident by now that the bridge was whole between the world of his readers and the tragic world of his imaginings" (95). [6] This movement reaches its first crescendo in the Quarter-Deck scene where Ishmael is unable to maintain his position as passive observer. Swept away by Ahab's frenzy, he returns to his detached post only five chapters later when he declares:

> I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs; and stronger I shouted, and more did I hammer and clinch my oath, because of the dread in my soul. A wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine. (176)

Between these pages the reader is afforded insights into the thoughts of Ahab, Starbuck, and Stubb, and witnesses a joyous midnight celebration on the forecastle. The dramatic nature of Ahab's existence, by its sheer intensity, momentarily overwhelms Ishmael's detachment. It is only after a conscious struggle within himself that he manages to regain it. Ishmael also struggles to prevent his narrative from being overrun by Ahab's fictions. The choric figure is thus faced with the task of creating a structure that will successfully "contain" the tragic vision embodied by the hero.

Much has been made of Ishmael's ability to peer into the thoughts and innermost feelings of other members of the Pequod, particularly Ahab. [7] Aside from dramatizing the tale in hindsight, these moments when Ishmael narrates Ahab's thoughts indicate an insight into the monomaniac's soul. Having never spoken directly to Ahab, the narrator exhibits

what appear to be fair assessments of his captain's inner turmoil. This ability suggests an affinity with the hero's cause, pointing to the narrator's own dark side, as McSweeney points out: "...if we say that Ishmael is a self-conscious narrator who projects onto Ahab his own deepest speculations and psychological anxieties, it would seem ipso facto to follow that Ishmael's vision is more comprehensive than Ahab's and to some extent contains it" (102). Grasping that the form, Ishmael's written text, acts as a container for Ahab's madness, the reader may also infer the narrator's struggle to contain the narrator's own doubts and fears. Such a conclusion explains Ishmael's deep interest in Ahab's plight.

Ishmael, as character, is only present during Ahab's moments of bombast. Only occasionally does he venture any suppositions concerning Ahab's "private" self - the one who *may* experience the dilemma in his madness, but rarely demonstrates it. As Ishmael notes: "Human madness is oftentimes a cunning and most feline thing. When you think it fled, it may have but become transfigured into some subtler form" (184). This subtler form of madness remains inscrutable to the choric figure, as Ishmael admits: "This is much, yet Ahab's larger, darker, deeper part remains unhinted. But vain to popularize profundities, and all truth is profound" (184). Ishmael's strange image of Ahab as "this spiked Hotel de Cluny" remains as ambiguous as any other interpretation of Ahab's actions. The "whole awful essence" of the monomaniac's soul remains hidden from the naked eye and will never permit itself to be revealed. Ishmael grapples with the primal urge that resides deep within Ahab's soul and is a part of us all. We are all descendants of the same line, Ahab is merely an extension of ourselves. Confronted with the mystery of Ahab, the choric figure perceives a resemblance to a part of himself, but also imposes upon the hero some of his own beliefs and desires.

In order to maintain the reader's sympathy for Ahab's plight, Ishmael strives to explain what the whale has come to symbolize, both for Ahab and the crew of the Pequod. Moby Dick possesses some "vague, nameless horror" that Ishmael despairs "of putting in a comprehensible form" (187). It is a daunting task, but one which Ishmael recognizes as essential if he is to convey to the reader the dynamics of the hero's relationship with the external world. He suggests it was "the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me. But how can I hope to explain myself here; and yet, in some dim, random

way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught" (187). Ishmael recognizes both his shortcomings and the impossibility of his task yet persists in the hope that some meaning may emerge from the allusions he puts forth. The whiteness of the whale becomes the metaphor through which to communicate the ineffable nature of his venture, and of reality itself.

Ishmael argues that when the color is divorced from its usual connotations of purity, and then embodied in a 'terrible' object (the whale), the true horror of its non-being is revealed. It is a non-color; it is pure nothingness. Unlike Ahab, however, Ishmael sees the duality of the situation; Moby Dick as symbol but also as innocent creature of the natural world. Throughout the chapter, Ishmael continually shifts his attention from the positive associations to the "darker" implications found in the color white. He conjures up the repellent image of the albino, the deadly apparition of the squall, or the pallor of the dead, and the ghostly superstitions of men: "Therefore, in his other moods, symbolize whatever grand or gracious thing he will by whiteness, no man can deny that in its profoundest idealized significance it calls up a peculiar apparition to the soul" (191). The unseen has always carried more dread for men, he argues, and whiteness embodies the visual absence of that other reality: "Though in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright" (194). Thus, the fear that whiteness instills is in part due to its ability to evoke a world that remains incomprehensible to us:

> Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color; and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows - a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink? (194-5)

Through Ishmael's reflections on this and other mysteries, the reader becomes aware of the common goals binding the crew to Ahab's quest. His pursuit is theirs because each man, at least unconsciously, wishes to reveal the mysteries of his existence, uncover the reasons why he must live his life as he does, and establish a degree of certainty with which he may continue to live.

Supernatural phenomena play a significant role in Ishmael's narrative. They serve to emphasize a pluralistic view of the universe that is stressed throughout the novel. The presence of Fedallah, as Ahab's dark shadow, is but the most obvious example in a novel replete with mysterious/occult incidents. Strange unidentifiable shapes follow the Pequod, sea ravens roost in the masts as though the ship were deserted, and the captain of the Albatross drops his trumpet in the ocean as he attempts to reply to Ahab's queries concerning Moby Dick. And as the two ships part company, small schools of fish desert the Pequod to range themselves alongside the Albatross. Ishmael notes that though there exist common sense explanations for all these events, "to any monomaniac man, the veriest trifles capriciously carry meanings" (236). As such the choric figure notes the tragic hero's tendency to make each truth his own, mistaking universal implications for the personal. And as the Pequod approaches its confrontation with Moby Dick, the incidence of unexplainable events multiplies, as though negating the possibility of viewing such occurrences with the hard reality of the whaler. Richard Brodhead argues this very "strangeness" helps to endow the novel with tragic potential:

> Like *King Lear*, *Moby-Dick* puts its characters through an experience so alien and extreme that they seem to reinvent spontaneously every philosophy of existence. And as in *King Lear*, what is finally most remarkable is not the answer they achieve but the questions they are impelled to ask. Frozen before the appalling strangeness of nature, they involuntarily seek to discover what it means: what is the nature of the world? what god or gods govern it? what origin are we moving from, and to what end? (137)

Ishmael seeks to understand and be "social" with every mystery and unfamiliar entity he encounters. As narrator, he attempts to incorporate all mysteries within a system that would erase all doubts. He overcomes the strangeness of Queequeg, the ambiguity of Father Mapple's sermon, and the bizarre predictions of Elijah, but is unable to do the same with the enigma that is Captain Ahab. [8]

The continued references to other texts, whether in the "Extracts" that precede the narrative, the cetological chapters, or in the citing of earlier myths, serve to illustrate the limitations inherent in any closed definition or system. No one source can sufficiently explain anything. These external sources also serve to endow Ishmael's narrative with a

self-referential tone. Ishmael's struggle to decipher the chaotic aspects of the painting in the Spouter-Inn, for example, is representative of the activity undertaken by both the narrator and the reader in *Moby-Dick*. Before boarding the Pequod, Ishmael seeks lodging at the Inn, a dark place strangely decorated with whaling paraphenalia. On one wall hangs a painting that immediately attracts his attention. The painting has suffered the passing of time in this damp and smoky room, and what the artist sought to represent is difficult for the beholder to grasp: "Such unaccountable masses of shades and shadows, that at first you almost thought some ambitious young artist, in the time of the New England hags, had endeavored to delineate chaos bewitched" (10). A black mass at the center of the painting instills in Ishmael the desire to uncover its secrets: "Yet there was a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity about it that fairly froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath with yourself to find out what that marvellous painting meant" (11). The painting, in fact, is a depiction of a whale impaling itself upon the masts of a ship during a storm. The subject, however, is less significant than the fact that Ishmael felt compelled to reveal its mysteries. It is as though, in its present delapidated state, the painting has surrendered the secret lying below its surface. Ishmael impugns a certain intention on the part of the artist not far removed from his own aesthetic. The artist describes the surface hoping that what is hidden from the eye will be visualized in the mind. In the opening paragraphs of "Cetology," for example, Ishmael attempts to explain his method for describing the whale: "It is some systematized exhibition of the whale in his broad genera, that I would now fain put before you. Yet it is no easy task. The classification of the constituents of a chaos, nothing less is here essayed" (129). The same technique is used in his attempts to uncover the mystery of Ahab and his motives.

In contrast to the tragic hero, one sees Ishmael as an observer whose arguments maintain a static circular form (rather than Ahab's kinetic and linear logic) and who continually affirms his right to remain inconclusive. It is this very rejection of closure that allows Ishmael to enlist the reader in an attempt to complete what is not. "Cetology" is one of Ishmael's attempts to exhaust his sources and provide the reader with the information required to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion. Paradoxically, the final paragraph in the chapter negates the possibility of such an idealized activity. Ishmael, acknowledging the

magnitude of his task, compares his narrative to the unfinished Cathedral of Cologne: "For small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, true ones, ever leave the copestone to posterity. God keep me from ever completing anything. This whole book is but a draught - nay, but the draught of a draught" (142). Ishmael recognizes the static quality of conclusions and his preference for the properties of equivocation. Such a stance allows him to intimate the presence of something ephemeral without restricting himself to a concrete label. At a later point he asserts: "...some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher..." (427). Ishmael's philosophy invests meaning in the very fact of existence. We exist therefore we signify. Ishmael is satisfied to make the best of what he has, Ahab continually seeks to question life's very essence.

Ishmael also persists in undermining his narrative, reminding the reader of his shortcomings. Near the mid-point of the novel, he admits: "I try all things; I achieve what I can" (344). There is, of course, a certain touch of irony in his commentary. He is constantly aware that his speculation might end in fruitless questions that hold no answers. It is his ability to recognize, and submit to, the multiple (and often inapprehensible) characteristics of reality, that finally distinguishes him from Ahab. He recognizes the attraction and validity of Ahab's pursuit while remaining continually conscious of its dangers. Ahab's fervor may be contagious but, as Murray Krieger points out:

> ...Ishmael finally resists, though, as always, in full recognition of the lure that has ensnared Ahab. The configuration is constant: Ishmael always makes the final acceptance of a natural order and a human order whose natures are fearfully ambiguous, in which the only order seems to be a disorderly confounding of good and evil. He seems able to bear this vision without denying an affirmative power to the universe and its Author, and without rebelling. Thus he understands the moral integrity that prompts Ahab to demand the purity of absolute separation between good and evil - although he understands also the immoral integrity into which this is perverted by the prideful refusal to accept the mixed universe. (Tragic, 249-50)

Such perception permits Ishmael to resist the urge for absolutism that is the boon and burden of the tragic hero. Ahab's curse is avoided by Ishmael through his acceptance of the uncertainty that is a fundamental element of the human condition. This is revealed most

clearly in the obvious contrast between Ahab's monomaniac concentration on the white whale and Ishmael's vision of Moby Dick:

> And how nobly it raises our conceit of the mighty, misty monster, to behold him solemnly sailing through a calm tropical sea; his vast, mild head overhung by a canopy of vapor, engendered by his incommunicable contemplations, and that vapor - as you will sometimes see it - glorified by a rainbow, as if Heaven itself had put its seal upon his thoughts. For d'ye see, rainbows do not visit the clear air; they only irradiate vapor. And so, through all the thick mists of the dim doubts in my mind, divine intuitions now and then shoot, enkindling my fog with a heavenly ray. And for this I thank God; for all have doubts; many deny; but doubts or denials, few along with them, have intuitions. Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye. (372)

The existence of these "heavenly intuitions" allows Ishmael to coalesce all oppositions into some notion of a higher order. In this sense, Ishmael's acceptance of these irresolvable contradictions is perhaps the strongest example of an all-encompassing faith in the novel. As Krieger suggests: "Beyond the shallow ethical, mainly represented by Starbuck, Ishmael is yet seen as a force for ultimate affirmation, suggesting to many critics the profound Christian vision that transcends the tragic without superciliously denying it" (Tragic, 252).

The strongest test of Ishmael's beliefs occurs during the "Try-Works" episode when the full physicality of Ahab's demonic quest is revealed to Ishmael. The scene contains a number of elements, real and imagined, reflecting the dark side of the Pequod's voyage. The burning of the whale blubber creates an atmosphere that one must grow accustomed to: "his smoke is horrible to inhale, and inhale it you must, and not only that, but you must live in it for a time...It smells like the left wing of the day of judgment; it is an argument for the pit" (420). With these words, Ishmael prepares the reader for the hellish reflections that are to follow.

By midnight the try-pots are aflame, illuminating the ship on the dark seas. The ship itself begins to take on a personality of its own, as though it were Ahab's strongest ally: "The burning ship drove on, as if remorselessly commissioned to some vengeful deed" (420). Surrounded by the crew, who are no doubt susceptible to the same influences, men recounting their "unholy adventures," Ishmael comes to perceive the Pequod as the embodiment of Ahab's inner being: "...then the rushing Pequod, freighted with savages,

and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into that blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's soul" (421). Faced with such a vision, Ishmael is forced to fully acknowledge his own attraction. Like a moth to the flame, he has been lured ever nearer by the intensity of Ahab's vision: "Wrapped, for that interval, in darkness myself, I but the better saw the redness, the madness, the ghastliness of others" (421).

Hypnotized by the infernal vision dancing before his eyes, Ishmael falls into a nightmarish reverie. In this state, he is "conscious of something fatally wrong," and yet is unable to stir himself from it. He has lost his bearing, and all sense of security deserts him: "Uppermost was the impression, that whatever swift, rushing thing I stood on was not so much bound to any haven ahead as rushing from all havens astern" (421). At this moment, Ishmael momentarily glimpses the irreversible fate that awaits Ahab and the crew of the Pequod. It is too bleak and despairing a vision for him to maintain and he suddenly awakens to the realization that he has let go of the tiller and turned away from the compass, nearly causing the ship to capsize. This brush with death and destruction is as close as the choric figure will come to enacting the hero's concept of life. "Look not too long in the face of the fire, O man!" warns Ishmael, as he comes to perceive the intensity of the vision that has overwhelmed Ahab: "Give not thyself up, then, to fire, lest it invert thee, deaden thee; as for the time it did me. There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness" (422-3). With these words Ishmael distinguishes himself from Ahab - the narrator has 'learned' from his experience, the hero has been possessed by it. [9] At this moment Ishmael truly recognizes the value of his "position," and is able to assess the gap which stretches between Ahab and himself:

> And there is a Catskill eagle in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces. And even if he for ever flies within the gorge, that gorge is in the mountains; so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar. (423)

This statement, with which Ishmael concludes the chapter, is the creed of the choric man; a self-reflexive gesture which emphasizes the need to *know* the dark side of life in order that one may protect oneself against it.

The criticism on *Moby-Dick* often gives the impression that one must choose between Ahab's vision of the world and Ishmael's "desperado philosophy." The two characters are frequently relegated to extreme poles of the spectrum: Ahab is cast as the unwavering hero lost within his monomaniac vision of the universe, while Ishmael is perceived as a delegate of the community. McSweeney, however, rejects the argument that there is a sense of communal brotherhood in scenes such as the squeezing case episode, that negates Ahab's fatalism: "The fact of the matter is that attempts to find a redemptive force of brotherhood in *Moby-Dick* are wistful..." (98). He contends that a just reading of the novel requires the acceptance of "at least two unflinching observations:" Ahab's and Ishmael's. He also points out the similarities between chorus and hero when he suggests: "Ishmael's positive reflections and even his purposive assertions are usually qualified in a negative way; and...there are profound affinities between Ishmael's vision and Ahab's, the deepest need of both being not human solidarity but psychic wholeness" (98). In the act of recognizing these similarities the reader is more susceptible to the powers of tragic truth. Our identification with Ishmael provides us with the necessary distance from which to safely acknowledge whatever common features we may share with Ahab. Is this not a requirement of the tragic form, the need to be unflinching, to face fully the dark truths of one's existence? The novel forces us to recognize Ahab's desire for certainty and his need to exercise his will upon the world as traits we all share. Having won our sympathy and made us feel the attractiveness of Ahab's cause, Ishmael must also underline the dangers inherent in such a pursuit. Psychic wholeness is not achieved without taking into account the dark side of one's self, and such activity all too often leads to madness and despair. Ishmael's narration, in acknowledging the necessity of Ahab's vision, strives to transcend it. By "containing" it within a formal structure and encompassing Ahab's vision within his pluralistic philosophy Ishmael intimates the existence of a higher plane that envelops and supersedes man's subjective viewpoint.

Whether a balance is achieved between the darkness of Ahab's vision and Ishmael's acceptance of it remains a point of contention. In his assessment of *Moby Dick*, Richard Sewall puts forth an argument that is often levelled against modern tragedy. He suggests the events portrayed in the novel are too relentlessly horrific and that the ending may be too

empty of hope to conform to the classical requirements of tragedy. "Such an ending," he concludes, "forces to the limit any definition of tragedy comprehending positive values" (100). Even after acknowledging that Ahab fulfills the functions of the tragic hero, revealing the dark truths essential to tragedy, Sewall still perceives the ending of the novel, the destruction of the Pequod and its crew (save one), as "too dire for tragedy" (104).

The question of whether we see the ending of the novel as conclusive or not is crucial to our interpretation of *Moby-Dick* as tragedy. Sewall's interpretation of the novel neglects Ishmael's larger, encompassing function outside the text. There are, after all, two Ishmaels in *Moby-Dick*:: the first who lives the adventure aboard the Pequod, and the second who narrates the events in retrospect. Sewall acknowledges that duality when he states: "If the world it presents is the starkest kind of answer to the Emersonian dream. It is not a world for despair or rejection - as long as there is even one who escapes to tell its full story" (105). The final image in the novel is ambivalently positive. The sole survivor, Ishmael, floats safely on Queequeg's coffin, unharmed by sharks or savage sea-hawks. This is a symbolic, if temporary, triumph of life over death. He is soon found by the Rachel, who "in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan" (566). This is the last line of the novel, and whatever affirmation is to be gained is surely left for the reader to discover. The Epilogue is intentionally ambiguous; Ishmael offers no concluding statements or interpretations of those calamitous events to which he has been the only witness.

Such a conclusion has led critics, such as James Guetti, to suggest there is no answer available and that Ahab is not tragic because his death robs him of any possible illumination. We must bear in mind, however, that Ishmael's entire narrative is in itself a reply to that cry of despair heard at the end of the novel. Ishmael's very construction of the tale serves to counter-balance the bleak response given in Ahab's vision and his fate. [10]

McSweeney notes of the Epilogue that it is "calm and dirgelike, even elegiac, and conveys a strong sense of all passion spent" (112). This is surely catharsis, as order is restored and life achieves a momentary calm. Ishmael himself claims as the Pequod sinks to its underwater [illegible]: " Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago" (565). [11] If we accept the stipulation that true

tragedy offers no solutions, and no hope of reconciliation or compensation, but rather provides man with a chance to glimpse the dark facts of his existence, what can we conclude is the role of the choric figure? Often the sense of affirmation that arises from tragedy, particularly its modern strain, stems from the knowledge that one has stood near the edge of the abyss and lived to tell the tale. The Epilogue, and indeed the entire text, of *Moby Dick* is meant to be interpreted in this manner.

Moby Dick is clearly a transitional text, as it points to the gap which lies between the hero's experience and another's interpretation of these facts. Ishmael, as choric observer, however, is still directly involved in the action - Ahab's quest belongs to the entire crew of the Pequod. It is only following the fiction of Melville and Hawthorne that the divide which separates the tragic hero from the choric figure begins to widen. The works of George Eliot, James, and Dostoevsky all concentrate on the growing alienation the hero feels within the community. By the turn of the century the gap has widened so that the tragic action occurs outside the realm of the choric observer's experience. In both *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim* Conrad's Marlow merely searches to understand events, not partake of them. Tragic awareness is now fully removed from the hero's spectrum of vision and becomes the sole property of the choric figure who attempts to encompass the experience within a narrative frame.

The character of Marlow, as choric figure, stands firmly entrenched at the center of *Lord Jim*. Jim, the active agent in the novel, is not a character in flux and, as such, awakens only limited interest in the reader. The Jim who faces Doramin's pistol blast is, in essence, unchanged from the individual we meet in the opening pages of the novel. The road which leads to his death and the manner in which he faces it elicit little surprise. It is a foregone conclusion. Thus, the central tension of the text does not reside in the figure of the hero, rather it revolves around Marlow's attempts to understand Jim's plight. Yet, as we progress through the novel, we become increasingly aware that Marlow is not at all certain he possesses the ability to convey, or that language itself can communicate, the intrinsic truth of the matter. At one point Marlow exclaims, "He was not clear. And there is a suspicion he was not clear to himself either" (136). This sentiment runs throughout Marlow's spoken narrative, and it is one which he undoubtedly possesses before he begins to tell Jim's tale.

So why does Marlow undertake this endeavour if he is not convinced that he can successfully render Jim's essence to his listeners? The possible answers to this question are central to an understanding of the text and also serve to illuminate why it is Marlow's quest, as choric observer, rather than Jim's, that is representative of the tragic struggle in Conrad's fiction.

Unlike Stein and the French lieutenant, Marlow is aware that his interest in Jim and its enduring quality spring from a deep sense of self-survival. Marlow's entire narrative is a conscious attempt to gain control over the doubts and questions that assail him in facing Jim's story. Jim's experiences convince Marlow that the security within which each of us lives our lives may be nothing more than a sham:

> Why I longed to go grubbing into the deplorable details of an occurrence which, after all, concerned me no more than as a member of an obscure body of men held together by a community of inglorious toil and by fidelity to a certain standard of conduct, I can't explain...I see well enough now that I hoped for the impossible - for the laying of what is the most obstinate ghost of man's creation, of the uneasy doubt uprising like a mist, secret and gnawing like a worm, and more chilling than the certitude of death - the doubt of the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct...was it for my own sake that I wished to find some shadow of an excuse for that young fellow whom I had never seen before, but whose appearance alone added a touch of personal concern to the thoughts suggested by the knowledge of his weakness - made it a thing of mystery and terror - like a hint of a destructive fate ready for us all whose youth - in its day - had resembled his youth? I fear that such was the secret motive of my prying. (43-44)

Marlow discovers in Jim's case implications that point beyond the man-made standard of conduct and raise questions about the manner in which men choose to live their lives. The story of Jim aboard the Patna has momentarily lifted the superficial covering placed upon life by the "fixed standard of conduct" created and adhered to by Marlow and his fellow men. In attempting to penetrate the "mystery and terror" of Jim's fate, Marlow recognizes the paradox with which each of us struggles. His narrative becomes a conscious attempt to grapple with the realization that while each individual must perform his duty, like the French lieutenant, this existential doubt remains an omnipresent part of our lives.

Marlow's refusal to commit himself to any definitive statements, however, also arises from his desire to make Jim's tale tragic. He hopes to portray Jim as both noble and a

failure and, in so doing, demonstrate the paradox of human existence. The underlying ironic tone of the novel, however (the title itself being the greatest irony), negates the possibility of creating a tragic figure out of Jim. Stein, Jewel, and Marlow all possess a deeper insight into Jim's character than Jim himself. Consequently, the reader is far more apt to identify with them, rather than with Jim. This poses a problem for the modern tragic genre, for how can we say that tragedy exists if we cannot imagine an action that genuinely embodies it? Fifty years after *Moby-Dick*, we see tragedy experienced at the level of idea where emphasis is placed upon the tragic observer rather than the instigator.

Marlow, as Conrad's sensitive observer, is the character who most fully senses the magnitude of Jim's failure. Paradoxically, this very sensitivity will push Marlow to make a tragic hero of Jim. At moments Marlow seems to negate Jim's "failure" by endowing the universe with the power of intention; implying that the hero's fate was partly predetermined. Marlow's commentary occasionally strays toward a theory of determinism, allowing Jim the benefit of a doubt he has not truly earned. In referring to the Patna incident, for example, Marlow concludes:

> ...the incident was rare enough to resemble a special arrangement of a malevolent providence,which, unless it had for its object the killing of a donkeyman and the bringing of worse than death upon Jim, appeared an utterly aimless piece of devilry. (123-4)

Of course, as readers, we should not perceive Marlow as being immune or exempt from that hope and logic that protects us from the tragic truth. Marlow's self-conscious manipulation of his material should alarm the reader to a certain sense of self-preservation on the part of the choric figure. Even Marlow's self-interrogatory style betrays an unwillingness to probe too deeply the "secret cause" of Jim's fate.

It is in his interview with Jewel, finally, that Marlow comes closest to confronting that elusive truth. Jewel is a perfect vehicle for Conrad, giving him an entirely different angle from which to formulate a picture of Jim. She does not belong to the world from which Marlow and his "fixed standard of conduct" emanate. Rather she is oblivious to such concerns, her emphasis and method of questioning relying on instinct rather than facts. At one point Marlow notes, "She had been carried off to Patusan before her eyes were open. She had grown up there; she had seen nothing, she had known nothing, she had no

conception of anything" (232). Yet Marlow portrays her as possessing a wisdom other than that which can be obtained in the civilized world. [12] Despite what she has witnessed, or perhaps because of what she has witnessed, Jewel, much like the reader and Marlow, searches for a summation or an explication of Jim's character. Marlow can only voice his ineffectiveness at providing her with such an assessment: "She wanted an assurance, a statement, a promise, an exclamation - I don't know how to call it: the thing has no name" (231). It is Jewel's persistence and her conviction that Marlow knows the truth about Jim that finally push him to the edge of a realization:

> For a moment I had a view of the world that seemed to wear a vast and dismal aspect of disorder, while, in truth, thanks to our unwearied efforts, it is as sunny an arrangement of small conveniences as the mind of man can conceive. But still - it was only a moment: I went back into my shell directly. One must - don't you know? - though I seemed to have lost all my words in the chaos of dark thoughts I had contemplated for a second or two beyond the pale. These came back, too, very soon, for words also belong to the sheltering conception of light and order which is our refuge. (236)

With Jewel, Marlow is forced to recognize the efforts he has made to avoid plunging into the abyss. Ensconced as she is in her life of pessimism, Jewel is not party to such avoidance mechanisms. She pushes Marlow to the brink of epistemological uncertainty because she does not refrain from facing the issue. And in contrast to Stein, who can approach Jim's tale as a case study (at least for a short while), Jewel has a greater and more personal attachment to Jim. Through her insistence Jewel has obliged Marlow to acknowledge the truth about Jim, about himself, and about the strategies Marlow has used to assuage the onslaught of tragic truth.

Keeping these "strategies" in mind one can also see Marlow's narrative as an exposition on the form that tragic realization must take. When he states that "it is as sunny an arrangement of small conveniences as the mind of man can conceive," he is conceding that any formulation is hampered by doubt and an irreducible ignorance of the secret cause. Viewed in this light, his narrative can be interpreted as an attempt to make a comprehensible, and thus bearable, tale out of Jim's plight. Marlow is left to his own devices, and admits continually that he is unsure as to whether or not he has grasped the truth of Jim's existence. As he states at an earlier point in the novel:

> ...what I could never make up my mind about was whether his line of conduct amounted to shirking his ghost or facing him out...as with the complexion of all our actions, the shade of difference was so delicate that it was impossible to say. It might have been flight and it might have been a mode of combat. (150-1)

Such statements illustrate the paradox of Marlow's struggle. Marlow is acknowledging the fact that any structure he may construct to explicate Jim's tale will undoubtedly lessen its strength and impact. Marlow feels he must tell the tale continually conscious of the probability that in the telling he will allow the most crucial element to escape. The element of hope is certainly one that runs throughout Marlow's narrative, and one that he is forced to wrestle with repeatedly. Marlow is conscious that the truth often does not bear direct description - that in attempting to make truth a static thing one often destroys what is most vital in it (and this is perhaps Marlow's tragedy).

In reading Marlow's narrative one occasionally comes across a hopeful sentiment on his part; an unspoken desire to see Jim succeed in his endeavour. This is a driving impulse behind Marlow's spoken narrative - he desperately wants to believe that Jim can and will master his fate. Even after knowing the conclusion to Jim's tale, Marlow still seems to feel that Jim, under a set of different circumstances, might have triumphed. Jim is only one man but if he can achieve his goal, then there is hope for all men. Marlow notes of Jim's struggle: "It was tragic enough and funny enough in all conscience to call aloud for compassion, and in what was I better than the rest of us to refuse him pity?" (101). In this regard Jim's story is able to elicit from Marlow certain responses that resemble catharsis. Marlow empathizes with Jim's struggle, seeing both the common thread Jim shares with other men and the quality that distinguishes him from them. It is in this respect that Jim approaches the qualities of the tragic hero. Yet, as has been noted, Jim's problem resides in his self-centeredness, in his "exalted egoism." Ultimately the distance that separates Marlow from Jim proves too great. At one point, Marlow attempts to convey to his listeners the impressions he had in listening to Jim define his condition:

> He was not speaking to me, he was only speaking before me, in a dispute with an invisible personality, an antagonistic and inseparable partner of his existence - another possessor of his soul. These were issues beyond the competency of a court of inquiry: it was a subtle and momentous quarrel as

> to the true essence of life, and did not want a judge. He wanted an ally, a helper, an accomplice. (75)

And, of course, Jim does manage to elicit a large degree of sympathy from Marlow, and if his tale gains any credence it is largely through Marlow's efforts. Marlow continues by voicing his fascination with Jim, acknowledging the discomfort he felt at the intimations of Jim's outbursts:

> I can't explain to you who haven't seen him and who hear his words only at second hand the mixed nature of my feelings. It seemed to me that I was being made to comprehend the Inconceivable - and I know of nothing to compare with the discomfort of such a sensation. I was made to look at the convention that lurks in all truth and on the essential sincerity of falsehood. He swayed me. I own to it, I own up. The occasion was obscure, insignificant - what you will: a lost youngster, one in a million - but then he was one of us; an incident as completely devoid of importance as the flooding of an ant-heap, and yet the mystery of his attitude got hold of me as though he had been an individual in the forefront of his kind, as if the obscure truths involved were momentous enough to affect mankind's conception of itself... (75)

Being made to comprehend the Inconceivable - is this not one of the primary functions of great tragedy? Marlow undertakes a narration that vacillates between certainty and doubt, assurance and misgiving, sincerity and falsehood. There is a kind of "faith" that guides Marlow's narrative, and one is, at times, given the sensation that he is attempting to convert us to it.

Marlow defines his sympathetic identification with Jim by noting: "...I was bound to him in the name of that doubt which is the inseparable part of our knowledge" (169). Thus the vacillations Marlow undergoes in conveying the essence of Jim's character are similar to the uncertainty which resides in any attempt we make at explaining our own experience to others. Marlow's narration becomes, in fact, the primary action of *Lord Jim*, for the central tension of the novel resides in his struggle to apprehend Jim's existence. [13] Marlow's attempts are analogous with those performed by the reader in the process of interpreting the text. What the tragic agent was unable to grasp is left up to Marlow to interpret for us, and yet we are surely meant to accept his comments with a certain degree of skepticism. By readily admitting the difficulties inherent in his narration Marlow points to the role the reader

must play in the completion of the narrative. Shortly before he undertakes to describe the Patusan segment, for example, Marlow clearly acknowledges the limitations of his narrative:

> Even Stein could say no more than that [Jim] was romantic. I only knew he was one of us. And what business had he to be romantic? I am telling you so much about my instinctive feelings and bemused reflections because there remains so little to be told of him. He existed for me, and after all it is only through me that he exists for you. (171)

Is this not only a comment on Marlow's narration, but also on the literary experience itself? By creating Marlow, Conrad exposes many of the problems inalienable to the production of the text; the difficulties that arise in any attempt to communicate personal experience through language, and, ultimately, underlining the questionable success of such an endeavour. Marlow is questioning not only his narration, but also the ability of his listeners to grasp what is important in his tale. We may recall an earlier statement when he wonders whether men who have subjugated their minds to their bodies can fully understand the intricacies of Jim's story. The irony is, of course, that Marlow must attempt to tell the tale in the vain hope that at least "a glimpse of the truth" will emerge. As Raval indicates: "Clarity, self-understanding - the goals of an epistemology of the self - are thus put beyond the possibility of attainment, though, paradoxically, these goals are among the motivating factors that put in motion Marlow's narrative and the reader's interest" (48). At one point, after having listed all the shortcomings of his narrative, Marlow suggests to his listeners that they "may be able to tell better, since the proverb has it that the onlookers see most of the game" (171). Marlow is aware of the subjectivity that limits the power of his narrative. Yet he still expresses his wish to have things grasped, to have his listeners discover what is meant rather than what is said.

In Chapter 36, however, Conrad once again voices his disbelief in the success of such an enterprise. Here, Marlow ends his spoken narrative, and the immediate reaction of his listeners is quite revelatory. The omniscient narrator notes that the men "drifted off the veranda in pairs or alone without loss of time, without offering a remark, as if the last image of that incomplete story, its incompleteness itself, and the very tone of the speaker, had made discussion vain and comment impossible" (255). These continual vacillations, between the despair of not being understood and the hope that some comprehension may

emerge, are an intrinsic part of the dynamics of *Lord Jim*. The omniscient narrator's analysis of Marlow's narrative reveals Conrad's conception of tragedy as a form which reveals the necessary incompleteness and indefinition of our existence. Though we are finally given the "whole" picture of Jim's tale with his death, the fundamental questions raised in the novel remain largely unanswered.

What are we to make of Marlow's "failure" - are we meant to see it as an achievement in its own right? Does the very ineffable nature of the task serving to endow it with a certain justification from the outset? Or are we meant to look further and take our cue from Marlow, who suggests that "the onlookers see most of the game"? Albert Guerard comes to the following conclusion:

> *Lord Jim* is a novel of intellectual and moral suspense, and the mystery to be solved, or conclusion to be reached, lies not in Jim but in ourselves. Can we, faced by the ambiguities and deceptions of life itself (and more!), appreciate the whole experience humanly? Can we come to recognize the full complexity of any simple case, and respond both sympathetically and morally to Jim and his version of "how to be"? The reader, in a sense...turns out to be the hero of the novel, either succeeding or failing in his human task of achieving a balanced view. (Conrad,142)

This notion of the reader as the intended hero of a novel is a concept that places a disproportionate degree of emphasis on what can be seen as little more than reader-response theory. It cannot be denied that modernist fiction possesses a ready dependence on the ability of the reader to "complete" the text. The belief that a "balanced view" of Jim's fate can be achieved, however, robs the novel of its tragic effect. The repercussions of the novel do work themselves out in the reader's mind, but not necessarily towards any conclusion we might deem satisfactory or comprehensive.

Catharsis in *Lord Jim* arises from our willingness to believe in the existence of a viable solution to those problems and questions raised in the novel: a belief that is itself fueled by Marlow's earnestness and intensity in dealing with the subject. Marlow's repeated claim that Jim was "one of us" endows his tale with a sense of commonality - that whatever was "true" about Jim's tale is also true of our own. [14] When Marlow suspects that "the obscure truths involved were momentous enough to affect mankind's conception of itself," (75) we are quick to follow his cue. As Suresh Raval notes, Marlow's role becomes that of a guide for

the reader through the text; a guide whose role is to eventually point to that which exists beyond the text. Raval suggests that Marlow's narrative:

> ...contains implicitly and through distortions interpretive signposts which disclose [his] failure and exceed his intention partly by contradicting it. Yet this contradiction cannot sustain itself without showing at the same time in Marlow's interpretation a quality of response that will signal his listener's willingness to entertain Marlow's apprehension of Jim. The reader consequently is implicated in a movement of contradiction and is at the same time forced to carry on an activity of decipherment that Marlow must, caught in his own contradiction, leave unarticulated. (49)

Raval argues the novel arrives at the conclusion that there can be no conclusion. Neither Marlow nor Stein prove to be the unquestionable authority on whom we may place our trust. The subject of *Lord Jim* prevents any such assuredness, stressing instead the ambiguity that pervades the novel as it does life.

In not reaching any definite conclusion, Marlow's narrative avoids the pitfalls of false completeness and thus approaches the concept of whole truth (as much as anyone can). By relinquishing his quest uncompleted, Marlow leaves his listeners (and the reader) with the option to complete it or not. Thus, the reader is left with his own questions to contemplate - in making Jim a hero or a martyr is one simply refusing to acknowledge the truth? For if we read *Lord Jim* in the traditional manner - that is, a reading in which we expect some definitive morals or answers to be hidden within the text - we are likely to interpret Jim's death as a positive step towards redemption. Such a conclusion also emerges from our innate desire for affirmation. If, however, we take our cue from Marlow - which is surely what we are meant to do - we should view his reluctance to make any definite statements as a suggestion to do some soul-searching of our own. It is in the process of partaking in this activity that we approach the tragic vision in Conrad's novel. Edward Said puts forward the dialectic of *Lord Jim* in the following manner:

> What is the pressure upon Jim that makes him favor death over life, and which urges Marlow and Conrad towards "inconclusive experiences" that reveal less to the reader than he is entitled normally to expect? In all cases there exists a fatalistic desire to behold the self passively as an object told about, mused on, puzzled over, marvelled at fully, in utterance. That is, Jim, Marlow, and Conrad having everywhere conceded that one can neither completely realize one's own nor fully grasp someone else's life

> experience, are left with a desire to fashion verbally and approximately their individual experience in the terms unique to each one. Since invariably this experience is either long gone or by definition almost impossible, no image can capture this, just as finally no sentence can either. (40)

Jim innocently lives out his life, completely oblivious to the deeper repercussions his actions incur. Marlow is correct in noting that Jim's story, in the larger scheme of things, is "as completely devoid of importance as the flooding of an ant-heap," and yet he is unable to ignore it. The very impossibility of completing his quest, combined with the inherent futility of Jim's life, awaken in Marlow a conscious conception of the tragic sense of life.

Faulkner employs a technique similar to Conrad's in *Absalom, Absalom!*, adding layer upon layer of conjecture and supposition around the plot, which acts as the core of the novel. The multiplicity of narrative voices, a Faulknerian trademark, provides a unique vantage point from which to study the role of the choric figure in the tragic novel. The novel's quartet of narrators, and their various juxtapositions, provide for the reader those insights and manipulations that are inherent characteristics of choric narration. The chorus dominates the landscape of *Absalom* in a manner not seen in either *Moby Dick* or *Lord Jim.* Faulkner overcomes the limitations of a subjective viewpoint by presenting four versions of the tale tangentially. It is his intention to use these narrators as the tools to elicit the recognition and illumination that eluded the hero. Taking his cue from Conrad, Faulkner creates a structure that elicits intimations of tragic knowledge from the chorus and, ultimately, the reader.

If the Thomas Sutpen of the novel is a product of the combined narratives, however, it can also be said that Quentin's narration exists as a logical result of the narratives that preceded it. Quentin's narrative is created, at least partially, as a reaction to the versions of the Sutpen saga constructed by Miss Rosa, Mr.Compson, and even Shreve. An understanding of the tragic elements of *Absalom, Absalom!* is dependent upon recognizing the dynamics of Quentin's reaction. Each narrative, including Quentin's, is an attempt by its narrator to justify his or her own beliefs, actions, and insecurities. In the process, each narrative tends to point out the inadequacies of its counterparts. It is the singular nature of Quentin's insecurities, however, and his inability to extricate himself from the tale he is

weaving, that serve to add a dimension to his narrative the others lack. He is finally implicated in his version of events in a way that Miss Rosa and Mr.Compson are not.

It is possible to interpret the various narratives as separate attempts at imposing some form of order over the chaos of the Sutpen saga. The choric observer and the hero of modern tragedy thus share a similar pursuit. They are both intent, according to their particular idiom, on constraining the uncertainty that surrounds them. The hero believes he can control all elements of his life through the infallibility of his design The choric figure, on the other hand, would impose a formal order on life by confining events (and people) within the structure of his narrative. The reader, however, quickly becomes aware that each narrative represents its narrator's struggle to gain control over some uncertainty that threatens the integrity of his or her existence. As Donald Kartiganer suggests: "Each version of the Sutpen story we receive, each interpretation of the available facts into a particular plot, equipped with motive and meaning, is an exercise in symbolic extrication from some condition of anxiety" (72). Each narrator attempts to relieve that "anxiety" by confining the Sutpen saga to a structure that limits its powers to surprise or to undermine the fragility of their own existence. [15]

From Miss Rosa's rebuttal of the outrage she suffered at Sutpen's hands to Mr.Compson's explanations for the downfall of the Sutpen aristocracy to Quentin's attempt at justifying his own incestuous desires through the character of Henry Sutpen, each narrator has a self-serving purpose for constructing his narrative. Kartiganer claims that each:

> ...re-creation of the past becomes a source of symbolic consolation, a strategy with which to relieve the pressures of private anguish. Despite the intensity of all these tales and the investment being made, and despite the willingness to deal with some imagined crisis on which to test their aesthetic strength, the fact remains that they are all examples of imaginative manipulation for their creators' ends. (96-7)

As such, a (false) sense of superiority permeates the narratives - a superiority that is most clearly demonstrated by the control the narrators exercise, or believe they exercise, over the actions and motives of the characters in their respective reconstructions. This belief is not far removed from the assuredness with which the tragic agent undertakes his fateful acts. Quentin's recognition of this fact, and his identification with the participants of the drama,

will eventually distinguish his narration from that of the other narrators. The psychic closeness he achieves provides him with the means of grasping the truth of the Sutpen saga.

As several images in the novel indicate, the humiliation and exasperation that Miss Rosa suffered has left her an unfeeling and outraged figure trapped within her past. Gone is all sense of detachment or objectivity - a lack that provides her with a certain power of insight, but also makes her incapable of any logical assessment of the facts. Miss Rosa, herself, underlines the tragedy of her situation when she tells Quentin of the shock she suffered at Sutpen's proposal: "And then one afternoon - oh there was fate in it: afternoon and afternoon and afternoon: do you see? the death of hope and love, the death of pride and principle, and then the death of everything save the old outraged and aghast unbelieving which has lasted for forty-three years..." (168). One can hear in Miss Rosa's words an echo of Macbeth's soliloquy and a similar desperate realization that life holds nothing more for her. Unlike Macbeth, however, her illumination is not graced with the luxury of a quick death that would extinguish the pain of this realization. Rather, her tragedy lies in the fact that she must continue to live having suffered the destruction of all hopes and dreams. [16]

In contrast to Miss Rosa, Mr.Compson approaches his narrative with the calm detachment of a scientist. He is forced to acknowledge the difficulties inherent in his recreation, due largely to his inability to explain Bon's actions. This admission is a pivotal moment in the novel:

> It's just incredible. It just does not explain. Or perhaps that's it: they dont explain and we are not supposed to know. We have a few old mouth-to-mouth tales; we exhume from old trunks and boxes and drawers letters without salutation or signature, in which men and women who once lived and breathed are now merely initials or nicknames out of some now incomprehensible affection which sound to us like Sanskrit or Chocktaw; we see dimly people, the people in whose living blood and seed we ourselves lay dormant and waiting, in this shadowy attenuation of time possessing now heroic proportions, performing their acts of simple passion and simple violence impervious to time and inexplicable - Yes, Judith, Bon, Henry, Sutpen: all of them. They are there, yet something is missing; they are like a chemical formula exhumed along with the letters from the forgotten chest, carefully, the paper old and faded and falling to pieces, the writing faded, almost indecipherable, yet meaningful, familiar, in shape and sense, the name and presence of volatile and sentient forces; you bring them together in the proportions called for, but nothing happens;

> you re-read; tedious and intent, poring, making sure that you have forgotten nothing, made no miscalculations; you bring them together again and again nothing happens: just the words, the symbols, the shapes themselves, shadowy inscrutable and serene, against the turgid background of a horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs. (100-1)

Mr.Compson's philosophy is fully expressed in this passage as he recognizes the limitations inherent in attempting to reconstruct the past. Yet it is almost as though, paradoxically, pointing to the weaknesses of his narrative will negate them He imposes a simplicity upon the figures in his narrative, turning them into little more than symbols - puppets or tragic masks. His characters are ideas and concepts; they never transcend the structure he has imposed on them to exist as real people. That Mr.Compson compares his narrative to a chemical formula reveals the distance lying between him and the characters in his reconstruction. Mr.Compson's belief that he can take the various characters and elements of the tale and "bring them together in the proportions called for " ignores the harsh reality of his historical perspective, and betrays the short-sightedness of his rational approach.

Is it not possible to perceive this narrative as a modern and cynical reaction to tragic truth? By depicting Mr.Compson's attempts to avoid the reality of his situation, is Faulkner not striving to awaken us to our own manipulations and maneuvers? Mr.Compson's theories are attempts to intellectualize and make the secret cause comprehensible, or at least diminish its intensity. His detachment is only disturbed by his inability to explain the events leading up to Bon's murder. For in his conception of Bon as ideal figure, as one who embodies all of his own beliefs, the presence of failure remains an inexplicable fact. He feels there is some meaning to be derived from the tale, that it should make sense, but the pieces refuse to be molded to the shape he would give them. By conceding to the "meaninglessness" of the tale, Mr.Compson protects his ideology from those truths the Sutpen saga would disclose about his forefathers and Southern society. His reaction to the Sutpen saga typifies one possible response to tragic truth. His concession to the "meaninglessness" of the tale is merely his method of containing it under an apprehensible heading. He feels secure with the knowledge that he can defuse the power of the tale, simply by classifying it as one that defies classification. [17]

Mr.Compson's philosophy negates the tale's capacity to elicit a tragic response. If we are to read Faulkner's novel as tragedy, if the audience/reader is to be made susceptible to its

aesthetic influences, there must exist an intermediary through which its total effects may be conveyed dramatically. In *Absalom*, this is best accomplished by illuminating the potency of the tale for a fourth narrator; a figure who is implicated in the tale through his past (and the narratives of the other tellers), but yet remains at a sufficient distance to permit an encapsulating viewpoint. Melville accomplishes this link with the reader through a dramatic rendering of Ishmael's struggle with Ahab's hellish quest in the Try-Works episode. Conrad intimates the uncertainty of man's existence and the elusiveness of tragic knowledge through Marlow's inability to confidently reject all that Jim represents. Quentin, Faulkner's primary narrator, is a product of his past whose "very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous names," and who was "not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks filled with back-looking ghosts..." (12). Faulkner leaves the responsibility of discovering the truth about the Sutpen saga to this figure, fully aware that he is not equipped to deal with the immensity of the discovery. He also realizes, however, that Quentin's situation fully conveys to the reader the power of tragic knowledge that lies dormant below the surface of our lives.

Such insight into the dynamics of the tragic situation, however, also leaves the choric figure susceptible to its influence. Ishmael barely escapes being swept up in Ahab's fury, and Marlow sadly recognizes the inevitability of human failure. Richard Sewall notes that Quentin is "a more sensitive and vulnerable Ishmael, for whom the telling...is itself a tragic experience" (136). It is tragic, in the sense that he is irrevocably altered by his experience, and so altered that reconciliation appears both hopeless and irretrievable. As Lenson has noted, the tragic sense of life is no longer felt by the heroic agents but by the "unheroic" few who are perceptive and discriminating enough to perceive the (entire) context in which these actions play themselves out. The choric observer (of which Ishmael, and his pluralistic viewpoint is the best example), recognizes the full spectrum of the tragic situation - something which the hero cannot contemplate if he is to succeed in his endeavour.

Quentin does not search to escape from the truths revealed in his reconstruction, as the techniques of the previous narrators permitted them to do. Rather, his willingness to confront these truths, at least on intellectual and emotional levels, endows the novel with tragic possibilities. As Sewall notes: "It is as if the whole burden of the South (and

mankind's) tragic dilemma is suddenly placed on his young shoulders" (136). Quentin is, to some degree, aware of the potential for tragedy in his tale, but not of the power with which it will assault his own beliefs. The dialogue he undertakes with Shreve reveals truths he is unable to reconcile and with which he is, ultimately, unable to live. For, ironically, Quentin does not possess those qualities, exemplified by Sutpen, that would allow him to confront these truths on a physical and active level.

The tension in the novel mounts as we witness the growth of Quentin's imaginative powers. As his susceptibility to the tale intensifies, it becomes increasingly difficult for Quentin to extricate himself from its influence. In the final pages of chapter 4, as Mr.Compson discusses the relationship between Bon and Judith and its effects on Henry, Quentin's imagination first takes hold of the tale. The similarities he shares with Henry will spur Quentin on in his search for the truth behind the Sutpen saga. It is also at this point in the novel that the omniscient narrator begins to play a more significant role, as he details for the reader the transformation Quentin is undergoing: "It seemed to Quentin that he could actually see them, facing one another at the gate" (132). This, of course, foreshadows the moment when Shreve and Quentin intermingle with Bon and Henry. It is as though Quentin's imagination leaps ahead of the facts provided by his father's narrative and begins to intuit its own truths. Once engaged in the creative process Quentin will build upon the essential facts to construct a tale that intimates a large degree of authenticity.

In chapter 6, the reader first witnesses the power that intuition and conjecture can wield over one who is fully and earnestly engaged in historical reconstruction. Quentin recalls stumbling upon the Sutpen graveyard, and hearing his father's explanations for the origins of each tombstone. Mr.Compson recounts how Sutpen imported two marble tombstones from Italy during the war, shipped them past the blockades, and how the troops transported them during their campaigns. Quentin's imagination begins to take hold as he visualizes the various scenarios that may have played themselves out, with the soldiers referring to the tombstones as 'Colonel' and 'Mrs Colonel.' His imagination embellishes the few facts at his disposal, creating scenes leading up to the arrival of the stones at Sutpen's Hundred. Quentin thinks to himself: "...he could see it; he might even have been there. Then he thought *No.If I had been there I could not have seen it this plain.*" (190). The reader, much

like Quentin, begins to perceive the advantage of distance as a contrast is made between the protagonists's view of their story and the versions created by the choric figures. Quentin is aware that had he witnessed these events firsthand, as did Miss Rosa, or acted upon them, as Henry Sutpen was forced to do, the truth of this tale would have remained a far more elusive thing. [18]

Critics who argue that tragedy must communicate a clear-cut moral lesson or affirmation often neglect the presence of intuition within the genre. Can we not conclude that recognition, no matter how clear-sighted, is still nothing more than highly-focussed intuition ? The hero grasps at truths half-revealed, moving progressively towards tragic knowledge. It is the acquisition of this knowledge that precipitates him towards his destruction. While this observation pertains to Sutpen rather than Quentin, it becomes obvious as the novel progresses that the latter is increasingly paralyzed by the recognition of his limited set of possibilities. Both conjecture and interpretation, by their continued presence, take on a reality of their own in *Absalom, Absalom!*. They do so to such a degree, in fact, that the full repercussions of the tragedy of the Sutpen saga are only felt fully half a century later, by a young man not directly related, or connected, to the central participants of the drama. It is in this context, most specifically, that we shall observe Faulkner's fascination with the notion of the tragic idea. The tragic dilemma, having sown its seed in the hero's mind, often remains there, irretrievable by the characters of the tragic novel. The elusiveness of tragic knowledge, combined with the inability of the hero or the choric figure to express their ideas with any certainty, paradoxically conveys to the audience the intangibility of the secret cause while emphasizing the very real power it exercises over the individuals involved. We have seen that the hero of (modern) tragedy often takes hold of what he believes to be an irrefutable truth/fact. The choric observer, attracted to the bright flame of the hero, is often compelled to question this truth, analyzing where the hero simply acts. Tragedy, like life itself, does not provide answers - rather it suggests that there are truths to be uncovered. The choric figure, benefitting from a distance that the hero can never establish in regard to his situation, is given the chance to intuit these truths in relation to the hero's existence and his own.

Quentin proves to be the most sensitive and insightful of the novel's narrators. His methods of deduction and analysis bear a close similarity to our own - he is the point of entry for the reader in the novel. He acts as the prism through which the tragic vision will emanate, and whatever idiosyncrasies he may possess (that might alienate the reader) are tempered by Shreve's presence. Not only is our allegiance to Quentin's quest progessively solidified as he approaches his goal, but the presence of Shreve guarantees an objective viewpoint that was absent from the previous reconstructions. Shreve, as outsider, is analogous to the majority of non-Southern readers who grapple with the enigma of the South present in Faulkner's fiction. When he asks Quentin to, "*Tell about the South. What's it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all...*" (174), he is merely voicing the thoughts of the reader. With the character of Shreve, Faulkner provides the reader with a concrete voice within the novel, but also adds one more layer of meaning to the body surrounding the core of tragic truth.

Shreve's ironical 'tall tale' approach touches the periphery of the mystery, providing occasional glimpses into the darker truths. Quentin recognizes the similarities between Shreve and his father, for each has reduced the people in the Sutpen saga to masks or grandiose caricatures of human emotions - thus, robbing them not only of whatever humanity they might possess, but also of their powers to surprise or mystify. On the other hand, Shreve's reconstruction, is only punctuated by the occasional "Yes" on Quentin's part, indicating an acceptance of the latter's narrative, as though he is conscious of Shreve's ability to temper his own interpretation of the events .

Although the omniscient narrator concedes that their dialogue may be populated "by people who perhaps had never existed at all anywhere," (303) he also justifies the type of reconstruction they are undertaking when he notes:

> This was not flippancy either. It too was just that protective coloring of levity behind which the youthful shame of being moved hid itself, out of which Quentin also spoke, the reason for Quentin's sullen bemusement, the (on both their parts) flipness, the strained clowning: the two of them, whether they knew it or not, in the cold room (it was quite cold now) dedicated to the best of ratiocination which after all was a good deal like Sutpen's morality and Miss Coldfield's demonizing... (280)

The narrators are committed to a reconstruction that would remove all mystery from the Sutpen saga. This quest for certainty is not dissimilar to Sutpen's attempts to complete his design. Sutpen's assuredness - his belief that the mere application of his design makes success a foregone conclusion - is similar to the attitudes of the narrators who feel they can constrict the tale's intensity within their formal structures. Sutpen's certainty is characterized by "that innocence which believed that the ingredients of morality were like the ingredients of a pie or cake and once you had measured them and balanced them and mixed them and put them into the oven it was all finished and nothing but pie or cake could come out" (263). The narrators, particularly Mr.Compson, exhibit similar tendencies, feeling confident their conviction will prove sufficient to uncover the truth - a misconception that is fully revealed in the conclusion reached by Shreve and Quentin at the end of the novel.

The narrative in the final third of the novel is a shared experience and contains contradictory interpretations. Kartiganer argues that the dialogic nature of the narrative allows Quentin and Shreve "to pass beyond defense and self-justification to something we are prepared to call truth" (92). In contrast to Miss Rosa's demonizing and Mr.Compson's detachment, the dialogue between the two boys contains an intuitive quality that eludes the previous reconstructions. Intuition counteracts any bias or pre-set conclusion on the part of the narrators and allows the truth to emerge independent of the hypotheses the young men attempt to foster.

The dialogue of the young men coalesces around Quentin's interest in the Henry-Judith-Bon triangle and his attempts to apply it to his own life. As Levins suggests, it is Quentin's creation of this "love drama" that "totally dissolves the invisible geographical boundary separating the Canadian from the southerner's world and actively involves him in the process of re-creation" (24). While their methods may diverge, it is at the moment the boys become unified in their objectives that they embark upon the path to truth. Their communion provides an angle of vision that is absent from the previous narratives as it attempts to understand and identify the complex set of human emotions that dictated the course of events, rather than merely discuss motives or give a linear account of the events themselves.

Chapter 8 is devoted entirely to a recreation of the relationship between Bon and Henry, and its eventual destruction. Motivated by a mutual goal, the Quentin-Shreve narrative flows with little interruption. There is an unspoken communication between the narrators that allows them to intimate a version of events that we are prepared to accept as valid. As the omniscient narrator notes:

> It was Shreve speaking, though save for the slight difference which the intervening degrees of latitude had inculcated in them (differences not in tone or pitch but of turns of phrase and usage of words), it might have been either of them and was in a sense both: both thinking as one, the voice which happened to be speaking the thought only the thinking become audible, vocal; the two of them creating between them, out of the rag-tag and the bob-ends of old tales and talking, people who had perhaps never existed at all anywhere... (303)

We are witness to a clear synchronization of belief and intent. The "unified" voices serve to temper each other and the narrative gains credibility. This is no longer Shreve's tall tale of the South or Quentin's romantic fable of doomed love, but the story of two sons and a daughter trapped in the tragic reality of one man's warped interpretation of southern doctrine:

> "And now," Shreve said, "we're going to talk about love." But he didn't need to say that either, any more than he had needed to specify which he meant by he, since neither of them had been thinking about anything else... That was why it did not matter to either of them which one did the talking, since it was not the talking alone which did it, performed and accomplished the overpassing, but some happy marriage of speaking and hearing wherein each before the demand, the requirement, forgave condoned and forgot the faulting of the other...in order to overpass to love, where there might be paradox and inconsistency but nothing fault nor false. (316)

It is this "happy marriage of speaking and hearing" which causes a breakdown in the self-defense mechanisms of the narrators. Shreve puts into words what Quentin already feels but is unable, or unwilling, to express. And Shreve allows himself to be swept away by Quentin's enthusiasm, momentarily shedding his veneer of detachment and cold resolve. Although the boys may have their own motives for undertaking this narrative (themes of father against son, hereditary guilt, sins past and present...), it is the quality of their conviction and the honesty with which they approach the Sutpen saga that allows them to briefly pierce through the wall of recorded fact.

The strength of this dialogue, of the cooperation exhibited by the two boys, allows them to achieve a certain transcendence. They are able to leap the bonds of time and imaginatively reexperience those events leading to Bon's death. The identification between narrators and actors is so strong that the boundaries separating the duos are blurred. As the omniscient narrator notes: "So that now it was not two but four of them riding the two horses through the dark over the frozen December ruts of that Christmas Eve: four of them and then just two - Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry..." (334). At such moments the omniscient narrator is obliged to acknowledge the probable truth of their reconstruction.

Momentary transcendence over the physical reality of facts occurs when the two boys simultaneously concur it was miscegenation, and not incest, that lead to the murder of Charles Bon. Such a realization runs counter to the intents of their combined narrative, and indicates a reversal that liberates their tale from the confines of subjective, and self-serving, interpretation. The reconstruction takes on a reality of its own, almost independent of the structure that is imposed upon it, and culminates at the moment when the thoughts of the narrators integrate with, and become indistinguishable from, those of the actors in the drama. This is the most crucial moment in the novel, as Kartiganer suggests:

> The coming together of the boys (there is nothing comparable to this in the other narratives) is the mirror of the imaginative engagement with the past, an engagement so profound as to give their meanings the status of facts in our minds... The past is finally *known* in the dynamics of love, which becomes for Faulkner the power of the imagination to break down temporarily the fact of separation, of distance between knower and known. (99)

Their reconstruction of the final weeks of Charles Bon's life, in the dying days of the Civil War, reflects life as it must have been. We are witness to Henry's indecision, the climactic moment when Sutpen acknowledges Henry as his son, and the methods to which Sutpen resorts in an attempt to ensure the prosperity of his design. Bon, himself, is conscious of the powers aligned against him when he responds to Henry's futile proclamation:

> - *You are my brother.*
> - *No I'm not. I'm the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister. Unless you stop me, Henry .* (357-8)

Henry's final attempt to affirm his relationship with Bon, conscious of the filial and social pressures placed on his shoulders, is negated by the latter's resigned stance and defeatist outlook created by Sutpen's rejection. A particular chemistry holds these three individuals together in a combination with only one possible, and fatal, conclusion. It is this knowledge that comes to Quentin and Shreve, knowledge gained finally through reconciliation with the past, a genuine willingness to uncover the truth, and an acceptance of one's own (guilty) condition.

Quentin is never specifically told about Bon's "blackness," rather it is something he intuits, and this knowledge only begins to solidify as "truth" during his interaction with Shreve. The communion allows them to momentarily bridge the gap that lies between them and tragic understanding. The fluidity and flexibility of their reconstruction finally permits an intuitive insight into the events of the Sutpen saga. Together the young men gain an understanding and insight into events that eluded both the actors and previous interpreters of the legend. As Pladott suggests, their unified visions, "penetrate and unmask the inhuman core of Sutpen's "grand design." They transmit to the reader the anagnorisis from which the "destructive" Sutpen is excluded by his tragic hamartia...Through their eyes, the reader discovers the full extent of the tragic waste of Sutpen's extraordinary potential" (111). The tale as constructed by the young men, however, also reveals the true tragedy lying beyond the person of Thomas Sutpen. In consequence of his actions, the fates not only destroy Sutpen, but all those close to him. He triggers the tragic spring, and it uncoils until all that is left is a flaming, crumbling house, and the memories of an outraged spinster. The image of Jim Bond, the negro idiot who howls at the night, echoes Macbeth's famous soliloquy and reminds the reader of what might have been.

The truth derived from the Shreve-Quentin dialogue is attained with great difficulty, and requires an even greater resolve to maintain. The concluding chapter accentuates the distance that lies between the young men, both geographically and emotionally. Shreve is unable to understand Quentin's reaction to the revelation and Quentin returns to his protective insular self, exhibited in the shrill denial that closes the novel. Although they may be united in their purpose, that of determining a logical explanation for Bon's murder, it is apparent that their conclusions do not elicit similar responses. The discovery of Henry's

true motives only befuddles Shreve, while it goes straight to the heart of all of Quentin's uncertainties. Cleanth Brooks suggests the quality that distinguishes Quentin from his friend is "a sense of the presence of the past, and with it, and through it, a personal access to the tragic vision" (Faulkner, 314). Quentin's attachment to the South, implicates him in its history and its beliefs, to a degree that Shreve never will, or can, be.

Quentin's sensitivity to the issues, and his susceptibility to their significance serves to distinguish his experience from Shreve's. The phase of recognition, in the tragic cycle of *Absalom, Absalom!* - the ability to assess the full strength of its repercussions - falls squarely on Quentin's shoulders. As Levins points out:

> It is not Sutpen, but Quentin who, at the price of never again knowing a single moment of peace, realizes the injustice behind the design iself and, in so doing, experiences the recognition which can bring about a new order of things. In his agonized cry as the novel ends is his realization of the enormous consequences of Sutpen's fatal sin, a sin which Quentin extends to include not just the doomed progenitor of Sutpen's Hundred but all the South. (45-6)

The dramatic focus of the dialogue permits Faulkner to convey the full power of the revelation and its startling effects on Quentin. He sees what Sutpen, in his blindness, could not. It is a mistake, however, to invest Quentin with more heroic stature than is actually at his disposal, as Levins's analysis would seem to do. At the end of the novel one feels certain that Quentin is not an individual capable of "bring[ing] about a new order of things." Rather, the lasting effect of the novel's conclusion is a sense of futility and sadness, as the one figure who does achieve recognition is inadequately equipped to bring about any significant change. This, in itself, is tragic.

Quentin's identification with Henry and the sympathetic attachment he feels with the characters in his reconstruction distinguishes his narration from the others in the novel. It is noteworthy, in contrast to the previous novels studied, that the figure with whom Quentin identifies is *not* the major protagonist of the novel - an element which clearly provides *Absalom, Absalom!* with a different choric perspective. Quentin's close identification with Henry permits him to deduce facts that elude the re-creations of both Miss Rosa and Mr.Compson. The common bond he shares with a victim of the events, rather than with the instigator of the tragic action, is a contrast from the previous choric figures we have studied.

Stephen M. Ross touches briefly on this disparity when he compares Quentin to Marlow, and the progression they both share in their respective narratives - from simple listener to teller to active participant in the tale. Ross argues the difference between the two narrators is "a matter of degree not kind," but also suggests that:

> ...the sense of Quentin's involvement...plunges the reader deeper into his consciousness than he is ever permitted into Marlow's. In spite of his profound concern for Jim, Marlow remains an observer... *Absalom, Absalom!* is Quentin's book in a way *Lord Jim* is not Marlow's (or the privileged man's); Quentin's psychic identification with the Sutpens, with Henry in particular, is absolutely crucial to the experience of *Absalom, Absalom!*, because this identification dramatizes the cumulative effect of the novel's rhetoric. (S.M. Ross, 204-5)

Quentin's projection of self into the Sutpen saga, through the character of Henry, provides him with the means to fully experience the consequences of past actions, and overcome the restrictions of historical reconstruction.

Quentin's meeting with Henry, shortly before the latter's death, helps to corroborate and justify his interpretation of past events. During the few minutes spent in Henry's presence the full weight of the tragedy bears down on Quentin. The barrier between reality and fiction is sensed, and the distance separating Quentin and his reconstruction is bridged. The interview with Henry, as almost every critic has noted, is sparse to the point of being no interview at all. It underlines the futility of historical reconstruction and the impossibility of attaining any true, and conclusive, meaning. Donald Kartiganer, for example, notes: "The scene is so grim and naked, so free of the imagination's insight, that it seems the most factual but the least true of any scene in the novel. This is fact stripped of art, the fusion of a supreme fiction now dissolved, as is necessary, back into the reality that fails to mean..." (105). Kartiganer, however, ignores the strength of Quentin's identification. For example, the omniscient narrator indicates that Quentin identifies so closely with Henry that, at moments, for all intents and purposes, he *is* Henry. Such a situation allows for the possibility that Henry's tragedy, at least on a metaphysical level, can also be Quentin's.

In order to read *Absalom, Absalom!* as tragedy it is necessary to answer the following question: to what degree can we argue that Henry's fate is tragic ? Brooks notes he does not possess the strength or the intensity of Thomas Sutpen (these characteristics are inherited by

Judith), but that he does have "some of his father's courage, and he has what his father does not have: love. At the last moment he kills, though he kills what he loves and apparently for love. It is the truly tragic dilemma" (C. Brooks, Faulkner, 303). The indecision and doubt which Henry experiences are clearly not traits shared by his father. It is Henry's struggle to balance his allegiance to his father with his friendship with Bon that places in question the assumptions made by men like Sutpen. The tragedy of *Absalom, Absalom!* is not found solely in the figure of Sutpen, but in the repercussions of his actions which, much like the ripples in a pool, spread to affect every member of his House. Sutpen's inability to recognize the potential in his situation, in the world that a Bon and/or a Henry might have engendered, is the true tragedy of the novel. The sense of waste, which is a vital aspect of the tragic, is fully symbolized in the image of the dying Henry and the flaming, crumbling house that are the end results of Sutpen's misguided dream.

The reader, however, is never given any true insight into Henry's thoughts concerning this dilemma. After the murder of Bon and his declaration to Judith, Henry disappears from the narrative as quickly as he fled from Sutpen's Hundred. The dilemma and the power of the recognition that Henry may have experienced, are unleashed only at the moment of Quentin's encounter with him:

> *And you are _____?*
> *Henry Sutpen.*
> *And you have been here _____?*
> *Four years.*
> *And you came home _____?*
> *To die. Yes.*
> *To die?*
> *Yes. To die.*
> *And you have been here _____?*
> *Four years.*
> *And you are _____?*
> *Henry Sutpen.* (373)

In order to make sense of the Sutpen tale, Quentin is forced to grapple with the enigma of Henry Sutpen. The minimalist style of the interview serves to point out the inaccessibility of the experience through the medium of words. Quentin as choric figure, however, must attempt to shape Henry's silence into a comprehensible form. By attempting to justify the truths in his own life, Quentin is trapped by the necessity of reconciling the oppositions

within his reconstruction. Quentin's need to complete his progression allows the reader to perceive the ideological aspects of the tragedy that were hidden in Sutpen's multiple attempts to complete his design. As such, Quentin stands as an intermediary between the absence of words, or explanation on Henry's part, and the reader. By making sense of the Sutpen tragedy for himself, Quentin involves the reader in a similar activity. As Brooks notes :

> And on the night when Quentin and Miss Rosa break into the decaying mansion and find Henry, who has come home to die, what looks out from Henry's eyes is not "innocence." Faulkner does not name it, but he does dramatize for us Quentin's reaction to it. At the least it is knowledge, a fearful knowledge bought with heroic suffering. (C. Brooks, Faulkner, 305)

This momentary contact with the past, with the tragic knowledge that informs Henry Sutpen's existence, leads Quentin Compson to the dark revelations about the South and himself. Henry's presence also serves to silently corroborate Quentin's reconstruction of past events and to solidify certain suspicions Quentin may have entertained. Its final contribution, however, is to emphasize the significance of intuition and conjecture in a novel filled with hypotheses. Though the question of expiation of filial guilt is never dealt with explicitly, it does provide a strong undercurrent in the novel. Quentin's "interview" with Henry is clearly meant to illuminate, if only momentarily, the hell Henry has suffered as a consequence of his actions. The forty years, between Charles Bon's murder and this moment, loom large as we recognize, along with Quentin, the unjust and tragic nature of Henry Sutpen's life.

Quentin's progress towards illumination provides the dramatic focus, and tragic tension, in *Absalom, Absalom!*. The first half of the novel, containing the narratives of Miss Rosa and Mr.Compson, maintains a static quality, while the second half, energized by the Quentin-Shreve dialogue, achieves a sense of urgency which spurs the novel along toward its tragic revelations. In these details one perceives Faulkner's use of a formula familiar to the tragic novel. The opening chapters serve to set the stage upon which the tragedy is to play iself out. Within the first ten pages of the novel, the reader is provided with a schematic outline of the entire plot of the Sutpen saga. [19] Once the author feels secure in the knowledge that the reader (much like the choric figure) has forsaken all

resistance to the probable truths the tale will reveal, he is then free to give full rein to his tragic vision.

We saw how Melville, in *Moby Dick*, uses Ishmael as narrator only until he is confident we are willing to face Ahab's fury unrefracted through the eyes of another. The final third of *Lord Jim* is presented in the form of a letter to the privileged man - Marlow's tale comes to the reader unhindered by outside interpretation or Marlow's tendency to digress. We watch Jim approach his end with the irreversible speed of the tragic hero. In *Absalom*, anger and detachment give way to conjecture and intuition. The omniscient narrator, while acknowledging that the figures created by Quentin and Shreve may never have existed, suggests there is a large degree of truth in their reconstruction; their dialogue encapsulates the essence of the Sutpen saga. Having gathered all the facts, the young men recreate the events in a fairly linear fashion. Time flows quickly in their narrative, as Bon and Henry move increasingly closer to the calamitous event, and the narrators's desire for revelations grows. In each novel, the dramatic tension is created by the narrator's search for the knowledge that eluded the hero, some revelation that will spare him from the hero's tragic fate.[20] One can assume that the reader and the narrator are hoping to extract the same truth from the experience. Quentin's emotional ties with his subject, however, prevent the detachment necessary to affect a cold appraisal of the matter. He is swept up in his desire for truth, and consequently shattered by the ferocity of the facts he uncovers. In this regard, Quentin's struggle provides the novel with some tragic elements missing from Sutpen's tale, and a stage of the tragic cycle not found in either *Moby Dick* or *Lord Jim.*

In each of the novels studied, we witness the choric figures actively engaged in re-telling the tale. From this point of view, the reader is aware that the events have already occurred, that they now belong to the past. The novel (and its narration) remains trapped within a historical context - it can only recount what has already come to pass. In contrast to the drama which presents events to the audience as they unfurl, the novel is clearly at a disadvantage. On the level of intensity, the novel cannot replicate those emotions unleashed at the moment of revelation unless, of course, revelation occurs during the reconstruction of events rather than during the time the events themselves took place.

At the beginning of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Quentin demonstrates a reluctance to even listen to Miss Rosa's version of the events. Mr. Compson's narration subdues the wild elements of Miss Rosa's tale and, consequently, provides Quentin with the initiative to undertake his own narration. At that point, it is safe to say Quentin is only dimly aware of the truths that lie unrevealed. His moment of dialogic communion with Shreve uncovers far more than he expects, leading to the hysterical denial that closes the novel. As Sewall points out: "It is as if a son of a lesser Hamlet or of an untutored Faustus were telling his father's story and finding himself unable to live with it. Quentin is no tragic hero; he neither initiates nor is involved in an action of magnitude; he is helpless to do anything about his tragic perceptions except tell about them" (136-7). Like the classical tragic hero, however, Quentin is irrevocably changed by the truths he uncovers. It is in this sense that Quentin most dramatically differs from Ishmael and Marlow. Unlike them, he does not control his narrative, rather it takes hold of him and leads him to revelations he would rather leave uncovered. Whereas Marlow can calmly reminisce and speculate upon the existence of "the horror," Quentin is offered no respite; he is confronted with the intolerable truths concerning himself and the system upon which his life is based, and is unable to reconcile himself with them. The strength with which this revelation assaults Quentin's beliefs endows *Absalom, Absalom!* with some of the intensity that is characteristic of tragic drama. The distinct movement undergone by the narrators, from indifference (at least feigned) to tragic involvement, is present in all three novels. It is only in Faulkner's novel that this involvement culminates in a recognition of the dark facts of the narrator's existence. This gradual psychic awakening process in Quentin to the realities of this world is a similar experience to the growth of self-awareness in the classical hero. As such, it is possible to conclude, as does Richard Sewall: "The tragedy is Quentin's" (143).

Though not actively engaged on a physical level, Quentin is committed psychically to a resolution of those conflicts which the contemplation of the past has brought to the surface. In the process, he confronts each dilemma to a degree that the figures in the tale did not. The novel ends before we can witness Quentin's full reaction to his discovery. Sewall may be correct in claiming that Quentin falls short of Hamlet, but he is chorus *not* hero. Quentin's role is to bring to light the significant issues raised in the "playing out" of the Sutpen saga.

It is the wisdom Quentin gains through suffering, and the concluding denial, which stimulate the reader to return and reassess the tale.

In the novels studied a definite pattern emerges. In each the choric figure undergoes an evolution from disinterest to total commitment. It is as though the character/narrator must be seduced to the hero's way of perceiving the universe. In *Moby Dick*, Ishmael shares a certain kinship with Ahab, but believes his own 'desperado philosophy' to be a sufficient antidote to the horrors of this world. It is only by slow degrees that Ishmael is exposed to the dark vision within Ahab's soul. In *Lord Jim*, Marlow's original disdain for the hero (demonstrated in his desire to see Jim crushed like a beetle at the Inquiry) slowly gives way to the realization that Jim is "one of us." Quentin's evolution in *Absalom, Absalom!* moves from his initial disinterest in Miss Rosa's tale, perhaps nothing more than a defense mechanism, to involvement beyond *any* hope of detachment. This pattern reflects a similar one undergone by the reader confronted with the tragic text. Tragedy peels away slowly the layers of our defenses, finally leaving us vulnerable to those truths it seeks to reveal. Catharsis occurs at the moment when acceptance of these truths takes place on an instinctual level, rather than an intellectual one.

The very act of narration which the choric figure undertakes, of course, reflects his own commitment to whatever truth is laid bare at the center of the tragic tale. The hero's situation, of course, indicates the physical aspects of tragic reality. His intensity pushes him to the periphery of existence, while his destruction emphasizes the inevitable conclusion of the human condition. As Karl Jaspers notes:

> By watching the doom of what is finite, man witnesses the reality and truth of the infinite. Being is the background of all backgrounds; it dooms to failure every particular configuration. The more grandiose the hero and the idea he is living with, the more tragic the march of events and the more fundamental the reality that is revealed. (78)

By placing the choric figure in direct contact with the hero, the tragic writer forces the character to confront those questions raised (un)naturally through the hero's actions. [21]

While the presence of the choric figure increases our susceptibility to the truths revealed in the text, it also provides a certain sense of "safety" - allowing us to peer into the

center of the maelstrom.[22] In comparing the choric figure to the tragic hero, Murray Krieger reaches the following conclusion:

> The extreme, then, is both more pure and more inclusive - pure in the adulterations it rejects and inclusive in the range of less complete experiences it illuminates even as it passes them by. Thus at once the rarity and the density, the order and the plenitude. But finally, in retreat as it were, there must be the observer, the more compromised and less committed, the resister of extremity who from his middle existence can place extremity for us. Not fatally challenged, he has yet learned vicariously to see extremity as the necessary and more instructive vision, the illusion - *aesthesis, Schein* - that which creates reality for us by forcing us to see it as we never dare to outside of art because in art we think it is appearance only. For secure in what we take to be mere aesthetic illusion, we plunge into the risk of art: we allow the comforting delusions we normally take for reality to trace their path to extremity, there to be given back utter reality, that which terrifies us even as it returns us, newly sound and justified, to our middle (and muddled) existences chastened by extremity and taking up the order in our lives with tender hands that now know its delusiveness and its fragile, unsubstantial prospects. (Tragic, 256-7)

The emphasis, for both Jaspers and Krieger, is the revelation of "utter reality" that tragedy affords the hero, the choric observer, and the reader/audience. The dynamics of the hero's situation allows for the peeling away of those layers that have obscured this particular truth. By placing the choric observer between the reader and the hero, the tragic author creates an atmosphere that permits an observation of the extremity without falling prey to the despair experienced by the hero.

We are lured into the chaos by the choric figure's apparent willingness to confront the hero's extremity. If he can do it so can we. David Lenson, using Nietzsche's Apollonian-Dionysian dialectic, suggests this identification is a vital component in the reader's progress towards affirmation:

> In post-classical times, Dionysian characters are not revelers, but are still choric in the sense that they represent a larger communality of experience, the anonymous labor, reflection and reaction that characterize the sensitive unheroic men with whom the world is most generally populated. Thus we have a Horatio, an Ishmael, a Quentin Compson, not creatures of license and disorder, but delegates of the order of compassion, reflection, survival and affirmation - and suffering. In modern tragedy, this is what we mean by Dionysian. (20-1)

Lenson attributes to the choric figure the ability to place in perspective, and counterbalance, the actions committed by the hero. The chorus exhibits an awareness of the interconnectedness of life - knowledge that evades the hero focussed on his objective. In one sense, the chorus represents the stability and the perseverance of mankind in the face of those obstacles and hardships that destroyed the hero. The sense of permanence intimated by the choric figure's presence implies to the reader that the conclusion presented in the tragic text is not all-encompassing, but merely an isolated manifestation, albeit exemplary, of the human condition.

The hero's experience, however, remains an extremely elusive thing - not subject to the concrete descriptions one would wish to apply to it. Bruce Kawin explains "secondary first-person narration," and its usefulness in conveying the essence of the matter:

> ...direct recounting would inevitably have been inadequate either to suggest or to analyze the implications of their heroes' quests, whether after white whales or green dock lights, into the heart of darkness, or along the path with the heart. One of the difficulties inherent in overreaching limits is that one may cease to make sense to one's fellows. This suggests the necessity of provoking understanding not through explanations but through kindred experience. (34)

The "secret cause" cannot be named, it can only be intimated, through a structure resembling Marlow's technique of describing the outside of the kernel. Each narrator, in his attempt to remove a layer from the mystery, tends to add another of his own. The novel thus exists as a series of impressions that allude to the truth lying at its center without ever naming it outright. As one nears the heart of the mystery, the usefulness of language is progressively exhausted. It is the paradox of tragic knowledge (and this, in fact, makes it "tragic") that the nearer we come to its source the more likely our ability to describe it will diminish. This explains Ishmael's struggle with Ahab and the whale, Kurtz's "the horror," or the sparseness of Henry Sutpen's interview with Quentin. And Quentin's shrill denial at the the end of the novel, for example, finally reflects his inability to express his situation and the effect of the revelations on his psyche. As Kawin notes of the relationship between the hero and the observer:

> The metaphysical hero - Ahab, Kurtz, don Juan - is a figure who has so closely touched these mysteries that he can be said (from the perspective of

> the apprentice) to have joined them, a prophet who has so unequivocally launched himself into silence that he cannot tell the whole of his story but can at best encourage a kindred spirit to follow him and thus find out the heart of that story for himself. The more the apprentice reaches the master's level of understanding, the more difficult it is for him to set down what he knows; his own story becomes nearly as problematic as the master's. (36-7)

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, for example, Quentin's experience has so closely touched Sutpen's (and Henry's) that he has been rendered virtually speechless. Quentin's situation has indeed become as "problematic" as Sutpen's. The distance necessary for an objective viewpoint has disappeared and Quentin's position, as narrator within the 'triangle,' becomes indistinguishable from that of the tragic instigator.

In the novels studied, we have seen the distance separating the hero from the reader grow, while the hero and choric figure have somehow been brought closer together. Such juxtapositions requires implicitly a greater degree of reader participation. It also stands to reason that the more directly the reader is implicated in the completion of the tragic cycle, the greater the potential for tragic effect. The following chapter will attempt to answer some questions on the issue of catharsis and its existence within and outside of the tragic novel.

Endnotes.

1. See Boas, who notes of the Chorus: "It is as if the audience were brought upon the stage and made articulate" (122).

2. In his discussion of *Moby Dick*, David Lenson notes that in contrast to Ahab, the tragic agent of the novel, Ishmael, as narrator, is: "...talking instead about that emotive, compassionate end of tragedy of which he is the delegate in the novel. In some sense, it is the creed of the choric man, that he can experience the blackest depths and the greatest

heights without artificiality; that he can experience all the extremism of tragedy and remain normative; and that his norm is intrisically more elevated than that of the man who expresses less" (61).

3. See Kawin who notes: "One needs to have the immediacy of the experience and yet be somehow removed from it. A second "I" - someone who is able to live through a less intense version of the event and who can speak of his own muted experience - can provide the necessary distance. By relating his own story, [the secondary first-person] provides the something through which the nothing can be discussed. Here the ineffable is being dealt with in a less direct manifestation; it is being framed and filtered at once. The second character, however, confronting the heart of darkness that envelops a monologue, or demonism in Nazi politics rather than in an actual deal with the devil, can speak of his own experience in such a way that it illuminates by implication what the central character has undergone" (146).

4. See also McSweeney (23), and Lee (111).

5. In chapter 23, in discussing his admiration for a certain Bulkington and a seaman's life, Ishmael points out: "But as in landlessness alone resides highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God - so better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety" (105). In according Bulkington heroic stature, and underlining the attraction of making Achilles's choice, Ishmael foreshadows his affinity for Ahab's pursuit.

6. What is contrasted here is the intensity of the tragic hero with the detachment of the choric figure, as Alfred Kazin notes: "With the entry of Ahab a harsh new rhythm enters the book, and from now on two rhythms - one reflective, the other forceful - alternate to show us the world in which man's thinking and man's doing each follows its own law" (53).

7. There has reigned a sense of confusion amongst critics as to whether Melville is not inconsistent in his use of Ishmael as narrator, and whether the adopted omniscient style is not simply the author speaking directly to the reader. In his interpretation of the novel, Bruce Kawin sees this narratorial effacement as another of Ishmael's techniques for conveying information to the reader:

> He refuses to be limited by the conventions of first-person narration and tells things that Ishmael the sailor could not possibly know, almost suggesting that he - not Melville - can change to a ubiquitous narrator at will... The only alternative is to treat Ishmael's intentional stylization as retrospective myth-making - an attempt as he sits writing all this down, to deal with his experience as if he were a novelist and to confront his nearly ineffable material on its own terms. (43)

This reading, of course, leaves open the question of Ishmael's reliability and the degree of faith the reader is willing to invest in the narrative. The style of the opening chapter intimates, in fact, Ishmael's wish to remain as ambiguous and as effacable as possible.

Kawin also notes that Ishmael's frequent disappearances for long segments of the novel may be seen as the narrator's attempt to establish some distance between himself and his tale: "His style and his nearly phantom nature, then, become the refracting medium through which he comprehends as well as relates his material" (43).

8. See Brodhead who devotes considerable space to the issue of the supernatural in *Moby Dick*. As he points out: "Actual occurrences seem charged with symbolic significance, with dark portent. Apparent accidents seem the products not of chance but of a preternatural necessity. Reality itself here solicits our superstition" (141). Brodhead also suggests that such moments serve to accentuate the existence of two separate realities; the tactile reality of the whaling ship and its day-to-day activities is contrasted with the ghostly reality inhabited by the spirit-spout and the predictions of the mad Gabriel aboard the Jeroboam: "At one moment the surface of the opaque world opens up to reveal a spirit, angelic or demonic; then, inevitably, we return to business as usual in a world whose hard surface seems to be all that there is" (145).

9. See Lenson, who claims: "But Ishmael is not being facile and optimistic in rejecting the nightmare of Ahab's interior world. Like the choruses of the Greek stage, he will experience joy and woe with the same vitality, so long as they are real, and not of the world of fire, the Apollonian dream-world, as Nietzsche called it" (59).

10. Alfred Kazin sees Ishmael's narration as a heroic deed; as an attempt to construct meaning from an essentially nihilistic and pessimistic tale: "What concerns Melville is not merely the heroism that gets expressed in physical action, but the heroism of thought itself as it rises above its seeming insignificance and proclaims, in the very teeth of a seemingly hostile and malevolent creation, that man's voice *is* heard for something against the watery waste and the deep, that man's thought has an echo in the universe" (55).

11. For an opposing viewpoint see Richard Chase who argues against the possibility of catharsis in the novel: "For Melville there is little promise of renewal and reward after suffering. There is no transcendent ground where the painful contradictions of the human dilemma are reconciled. There is no life *through* death. There is only life *and* death, and for any individual a momentary choice between them" (58).

12. The female figure whose words are misunderstood by the male characters is a recurrent one in tragedy. Her speech appears to be incoherent (at least to her male listeners) but, in fact, is transcending the everyday meaning of language. An early example is Cassandra in *Agamemnon*. Though she prophesies the deaths of both herself and Agamemnon quite clearly, the Chorus have a great deal of difficulty interpreting her words. This, of course, arises from the Chorus's innate refusal to acknowledge the dark possibilities. Robert Fagles in his notes to the *Oresteia* has pointed to the similarities between Cassandra's "broken utterances," which her listeners must supplement to make meaning, and those of Ophelia's mad rantings in *Hamlet* (Fagles, 301):

> Her speech is nothing,
> Yet the unshaped use of it doth move

The hearers to collection. They aim at it,
And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts;
Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,
Indeed would make one think there might be thought,
Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily. (IV,v.7-13)

Jewel is clearly of this company, as is Faulkner's Miss Rosa in *Absalom, Absalom!*.

13. See Edward Said who suggests that the loss of a set of communal values upon which the author can depend to convey his meaning necessitates the construction of a small self-contained community absorbed in the telling and hearing of the narrative. Said notes that with the advent of modernism, "the narrative no longer merely assumes a listener. It dramatizes him as well, so that frequently the author himself appears to be participating in the tale as an audience, or more precisely in Conrad's case, as the dramatized recipient of impressions" (38). This notion would also serve to explain the critical tendency to correlate Marlow's objectives with those of Conrad.

14. See Davidson who suggests: "Marlow, the privileged man, and the reader of the text, all face the problem of defining Jim, of deciding what his last message might be. Jim thereby becomes, as a kind of projection test, "one of us" in ways not originally anticipated and in ways that do not particularly illuminate the nature of Jim" (30).

15. Lynn Levins suggests each narrator uses a "different literary genre" to encompass Sutpen's tale: Miss Rosa dresses her narrative in the style of the Gothic, Mr.Compson uses Greek tragedy, Shreve the tall tale, and Quentin the chivalric romance (9).

16. One need only contrast Miss Rosa's state with Wash's reaction to a similar fate. In the shadow of that final insult cast at his daughter, Wash Jones is not able to live with the realization that his hopes and dreams have crumbled into ashes. Unlike Rosa who remains trapped in frozen outrage, Wash acts, killing Sutpen, his daughter and her child, and brings on his own death at the hands of General Compson and his men. His reaction exhibits another set of possible responses to the injustices that life would foist upon us.

17. See Wadlington's comments on Mr.Compson's defense-mechanisms:
"Acknowledgment, or recognition, entails in some measure the abandonment of the intellectual and other psychological controls Mr.Compson relies on and some risk of a "defenseless" involvement with others. In what Cavell calls "the attempt to convert the human condition, the condition of humanity, into an intellectual difficulty" (*Claim*, 493), either familiar knowledge or a lack of knowledge of others' experience can be used to escape acknowledgment and to excuse non-recognition. In both cases, there is the self-protective deflection of interest to an ancillary issue of knowledge" (85-6).
See also Mr.Compson's philosophy in *The Sound and the Fury* :"On the instant when we come to realise that tragedy is second-hand" (143).

18. In discussing Faulkner's fiction, Stephen M. Ross denotes the similarities it shares with Conrad's impressionist philosophy. He argues that in both novelists one may find: "the

assumption that conjecture can be a valid mode of comprehension; the assumption that the world as it comes filtered through another's life can be fully as compelling (both for a character and a reader) as "first-hand" experience" (199-200). Joseph Reed puts forth a similar argument when he posits there are two overlapping halves of the novel, and that the second exists primarily as a reaction to the first. Of chapter 6, he notes: "...it introduces the plot of Quentin's and Shreve's ratiocination, and this finally represents for us such a depth of involvement that it constitutes our primary allegiance. Quentin and Shreve have taken over the all-important function of *becoming* in the book. They have become protagonists, in the stead of their doubles in the first half" (167).

19. On page 18, Miss Rosa schematically outlines all of the major incidents that are to be recounted in *Absalom, Absalom!* .

20. See Stephen M. Ross, for example, who suggests: "The impact of hearing about Jim or Kurtz, or about Sutpen, is manifested in dramatic form in the story, since the expression of and response to events remain within the boundaries of the fictional world. Story-telling scenes or letters become more than structural devices; they become essential dramatic moments affecting the novel's final meaning" (204).

21. One may recall Melville's statement on Shakespeare's use of his tragic heroes: "Through the mouths of the dark characters...he craftily says, or sometimes insinuates, the things which we feel to be so terrifically true that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter or ever hint of them" (Quoted in Ziff, 59).

22. Warwick Wadlington, referring to the three 'new' voices that are introduced at the end of *Light n August*, suggests they exist as voices of the community, and are thus comparable to the Chorus in Greek tragedy. Wadlington argues the chorus offers a sense of stability to contrast with the turbulence of the tragic hero: "The chorus intimates that a dreamy unchangefulness shadows the novel's tragic plot. At one level its inalienable calm reinforces the promise of the plot's end, the cathartic peace that will arise from resolution. In contrast, at another level its tranquil ever-present covertly denies that the plot need take place at all to attain peace - it disclaims the linear apparatus of catharsis, disclaims Aristotelian tragedy" (148-9). Thus the critic emphasizes the stable strengths of the chorus, suggesting that its very presence serves to defuse the threat posed by the hero. In her discussion of *Moby Dick*, Carolyn Porter casts Ishmael in a similar role. She envisages Ishmael as a narrator who establishes boundaries in order to subvert them. He quickly gains and retains our confidence, whereby it becomes easier for him to undermine our beliefs and question the systems we have adopted. Ishmael is a man with the conviction to share all convictions. No *one* vision will encompass all his beliefs, and he will take a little from where he will. This continued sense of spiritual expansionism finally prevents him from falling prey to Ahab's vision: "...in telling the tale, Ishmael develops a rhetorical defense against the threat that Ahab's quest unveils. If his narrative stance on the boundaries enables Ishmael to undermine the landsman's authority, it also enables him to resist the threat of absolute boundary violation that is at the heart of Ahab's madness" (105).

CHAPTER FOUR: NOVELISTIC CLOSURE, TRAGIC ENDINGS, AND CATHARSIS

No discussion of tragedy would be complete without addressing the issue of catharsis. It is not the intention of this study, however, to provide a review of the theories of catharsis since Aristotle. [1] Instead, this chapter will concern itself with those problems specific to the modern tragic novel and to the cathartic release experienced by the reader (ie. whether catharsis does occur, how it differs from the experience of the spectator, how it is similar,...). For economy's sake a general definition of catharsis provided by Abdulla will be used as a starting point. He defines catharsis as: "...an aesthetic response which begins with the audience's identification with the protagonist and leads to emotional arousal of two conflicting emotions (e.g. fear and pity). These emotions are resolved by their reconciliation, bringing to the audience a sense of elevated harmony, or peace, or repose, which can be thought of as understanding, whether moral, metaphysical, or psychological" (9). The key terms to keep in mind as we proceed are "identification," "arousal," "understanding," and "harmony." These terms indicate the four stages of the cathartic experience. Broad use will be made of these terms in order to encompass, as much as possible, the paradoxical nature of the experience.

In discussing "identification" in the tragic novel, it is important to remember that it stems from our intellectual involvement with the hero's plight and, particularly in the modern novel, with the struggle of the observer to make sense of it. Ishmael's technique - a dissertation on everything *he* knows about whales - suggests a lack of focus, but also assures the participation of the reader who must assess the facts for himself. Marlow's experimentation with his narrative, his avoidance of chronology and frequent use of anecdotes, also relies on the willingness of his listeners to "play along." The decoding of narration in *Absalom* is more complex, if only because it involves several parallel and diverse "fictions" and must take into account the intent and purpose of each narrator.

Quentin, as organizing consciousness, is forced, much like the reader, to make meaning of the various narratives at his disposal. Through the implicit inclusion of the reader's participation in the choric figure's attempts to understand the hero and his plight we are led to identify with both figures concurrently.

Identification is the inherent recognition of the fate we share with the protagonists of the tragedy. We should not, however, confuse identification with sympathy, as Dorothea Krook points out; the latter being but a minor, and incidental, element contributing to the former. [2] Identification is created through a complex juxtaposition of characteristics through which we come to see the hero as representative of the human condition. The success of the tragedy is dependent upon the tragedian's ability to create this bond between reader and protagonist. [3] At the moment identification is firmly established - when we recognize the similarities we share with the hero despite his "originality" and uniqueness - we become more susceptible to the development of the action and to the revelations we often sense as inevitable in the tragic form.

This sense of anticipation is one of the elements contributing to the "arousal" of the reader, heightening our responses to the plot as it unfolds before us. The tragedian must make us feel that we are not distinct from the hero, that his fate is simply a dramatic reflection of our own. It is thus necessary to create an atmosphere in which the actions performed by the hero shall be believable and yet endowed with great significance. This explains why the tragic hero often exists in a self-enclosed universe, where the stages of the tragic action, as it unwinds, are made explicit. Ahab on the Pequod, Jim in Patusan, and Sutpen in Jefferson, are all examples of individuals whose words and deeds are magnified through their virtual isolation. It is the writer's task to bridge the gap between the hero and the reader, in other words to "suspend our disbelief" in such men.

The language used in tragedy, and the apparent differences between that of the hero and the words of the choric figure, help to trigger our intuitive capacities, and make us amenable to the unusual juxtapositions present in the tragic form. Lynn Levins, for example, suggests there are two distinct prose styles in *Absalom, Absalom!*; the language of everyday and a "poetic tongue" spoken sporadically by the narrators. She argues the second prose style is, "consistent with the heroic associations with which Faulkner has invested Sutpen, and the four narrators, as they engage in re-creating the Sutpen legend, [and] assume the role of the Greek chorus..." (45). This rhetoric allows for the possibility of

viewing these actions in a tragic and heroic light, while raising the events above the realm of everyday occurrences:

> This elevated style is Faulkner's own equivalent of the Greek choral odes or Shakespeare's blank verse; it is not unlike Melville's rhetorical prose which sets apart the tragic story of Ahab from the rest of the novel, and it is to be purposefully differentiated from the more "realistic" diction generally found in the modern novel. (45)

Levins points to the similarities with Melville, but one can also see this language present in Conrad's fiction, in Marlow's elusive prose, or the cryptic statements of Stein or the French lieutenant. Such 'heightened' language clearly emphasizes the disparity existing between the real world and the perfection/purity sought in the hero's actions. Albert Guerard also touches upon the highly poetic language in the tragic novel when he suggests:

> ...the high language helps "carry" (or lend necessary distance to) events of tragic, mythical grandeur. Or, to change the figure slightly, the language helps carry the reader out of his everyday rational world of disbelief in major tragic confrontation and plight. In a world where such language is "common," both Thomas Sutpen and Charles Bon can sacrifice everything for a principle or design, and Henry can kill his brother at the gate. (324)

The language reflects the intensity with which these figures live their lives. It momentarily conveys to the spectator the heights sought, and sometimes reached, by the hero. It is the choric figure's function to ground the hero's speech and action within the everyday, making them comprehensible to his fellow men. Choric language often combats our instinctive disbelief in such events, and while couching the dark truths of existence in bearable phrases allows us to intuit the full repercussions of such action. Through a careful balancing of identification, anticipation, and intuition the tragedian prepares us to accept, and recognize, the despair and uncertainty of tragic knowledge.

We dealt with the issue of "understanding" or recognition in the second chapter, but did not discuss how this lack of knowledge or awareness is transmitted to, and resolved by, the reader. We noted the role of the choric figure as intermediary, but this does not sufficiently explicate the demands placed upon the reader in the tragic novel. While the hesitation to make explicit statements exhibited by the choric observers may be a product of their "closeness" to the hero, it also occurs because the tragedian wishes the attempt to bridge the gap to be made by the reader. Such an effort ensures a deeper understanding of the tragic fate. One critic notes of the relationship between hero and spectator: "A mark of

the tragic hero is his limited knowledge, and the mark of tragic irony is the contrast between the hero's ignorance and the audience's knowledge, whereby statements that mean one thing to him have a *double entendre* for them. In his ignorance the tragic hero displays the finitude of man. The audience are free from this limitation. Within the universe of the play, they have the omniscience of the gods" (Raphael, 196-7). In that momentary disembodiment, that separation from any relation with the "finitude of man," catharsis is realized or experienced. For a moment, the spectator is liberated from all earthly and human constraints, and is able to experience the "omniscience of the gods." (As we have noted, irony in the tragic novel occurs through the implicit demand for a second reading that is an essential component of modernist fiction.) Jean-Marie Domenach suggests a similar relationship between hero and reader: "It is essential that the tragic hero be completely absorbed in the tragic delusion; he cannot, at any cost, explain the tragic to us...It is not their awareness, it is their delusion that is significant; they are the only ones ignorant of what the spectators, the rest of the world know already" (39-40). [4] Tragedy only becomes tragic at the moment when we can conceive of it as such. The blindness of the hero is a cue for us to confront our own defenses and manoeuvers to avoid the truth. Tragedy for modern man resides in the idea, rather than in the action. A disembodiment from the physical reality of one's own existence, a separation from the "I", allowing one to objectify and affirm those truths existing above the minor details of one's own life. Thus, paradoxically, we recognize that the advantage we have over the hero is a created one, and thus false, merely reflecting our own ignorance and self-delusion.

The tragedian's goal, then, is to create a set of circumstances wherein both the hero (and choric figure) and the reader move simultaneously towards the same unknown, and yet anticipated, conclusion. The retrospective nature of the novel, however, dictates that the plot be only a tool in attaining that end. The plot holds no surprises for the choric figure; the hero's fate is already known. In the tragic novel, the reader is thus bound to the text by the mutual attempt to uncover the secret cause. The novel, if it is to succeed as tragic form, must then intimate the idea lying outside the realm of the tragic action. Bruce Kawin, for example, argues that novels such as *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Wuthering Heights* are "failed tragedies," because the heroes do not achieve recognition. He posits, however, a significant distinction between the two novels:

> The difference between the two failures is that the narrating force of *Absalom* achieves the recognition of Sutpen's tragic flaw. The title is not simply the author's overview of the situation, but the mind of the novel's crying out, as Sutpen never does, its ironic recognition of the right to charity and acceptance of the innocent at the door, and the self-destructiveness of compulsive rigid drivenness; it alludes to the former by its choice of the term "Absalom," and to the latter by its tone. Although Sutpen fails, the novel itself approaches tragic awareness. (179-80)

It is significant that in each of the novels studied (to say nothing of *Heart of Darkness*, *The Great Gatsby*, or *Doctor Faustus*), the title of each points to the mystery lying at the center of it. The implication, of course, is that the reader is meant to look beyond the confines of the (physical) text. Kawin's notion of the "mind of the novel" suggests there is an awareness built up in the reader, through recurring symbols and multiple points of view, of a larger pattern which remains hidden to the protagonists in the text. T. R. Henn, in fact, indicates that this is one of the ultimate goals of tragedy: "Its peculiar quality is to present the mingled yarn in such a manner that a pattern is perceptible. If that perception is accompanied by exaltation or ecstasy, by a heightening of the senses, by a transcending of the physical impact of suffering, grief, destruction, we are enabled to recognize and to possess, at least momentarily, values that we have grounds for believing to be permanent in their own right" (287). The recognition of the larger pattern which encompasses a smaller one (whether it be the story of the whale, failed heroism, or a fallen dynasty) often provides the impetus for the cathartic experience. [5]

The responsibility foisted upon the reader in a modern context, however, has led to intimations that the process of catharsis has undergone changes undermining its previously visceral nature. In discussing Ibsen's plays, for example, Henn concludes:

> The effect seems to be the thrusting of the whole responsibility back upon the audience or reader; the presentation of certain facts, assumptions, attitudes and emotions which are carried forward, incomplete, outside the theatre. All great tragedy probably produces some degree of psychic unrest, but this is a troubling of deeper spiritual waters; whereas the Ibsen interrogation mark at the stage at which the final curtain falls, is continued mainly as a process of the mind, raising speculations which are cerebral rather than aesthetic. At the same time we must regard this cerebral activity projected outside the limits of the play as incidental even if we do not dismiss it as a futile and otiose response. (178-9)

Henn's complaint that Ibsen's plays appeal to us on a "cerebral" level, rather than on an aesthetic or emotional one, is worth noting in correlation with the modern novel. In the

twentieth century tragedy is felt initially on an ideological level; its emotional effects are contingent upon this recognition. Is not the act of cognition, this moment of discovery for ourselves (rather than witnessing the hero's awakening), more powerful and, ultimately, more revelatory? The "working out" of the tragic paradigm, with the assistance of the choric observer, necessitates a conscious, and primarily self-aware, effort on the part of the reader. If the play or novel can instigate the reader to strip away the layers of self-defense and created illusions within themselves, the moment of catharsis will surely be all the stronger for it.

Our privileged position, however, should not lead to feelings of superiority over the hero. Such feelings can cause us to view the end of the tragedy as the proper course of history - as the way events *should* have turned out. In this case, the end of the tragedy is read as an erasing of all the horrors presented in the text. And affirmation is interpreted as progress; the surviving friends of the hero having benefitted from his faults. Dorothea Krook, for example, suggests:

> ...the final affirmation in tragedy is not necessarily, indeed not even usually, made by the tragic hero. In *Hamlet*, it is Horatio and Fortinbras who, mourning the hero who lies dead at their feet, proclaim that his greatness shall be affirmed and his suffering redeemed by the telling of his story, and the soldiers' music and the rites of war. In *Macbeth*, it is Macduff and Malcolm who hail the land's deliverance from the dead butcher and his fiendlike queen and the beginning of a new order ("the time is free"). In *King Lear*, it is Albany, Kent, and Edgar who express the first gleam of a fresh hope and faith, and the promise of a restoration of the "gor'd state." (26)

This is an all-too positivist interpretation of Shakespeare's tragedies which robs them of the element that makes them truly tragic. It ignores the ambiguity which is an essential component of Shakespeare's endings. It also negates any sense of waste or injustice that is a fundamental part of tragedy. The numerous problems which surround any reading of *Hamlet* should prevent anyone from arriving at such a conclusion. The dying Hamlet asks Horatio to "tell [his] story," but is conscious of the meaning that will escape any plot summary:

> O, I die, Horatio!
> The potent poison quite o'ercrows my spirit.
> I cannot live to hear the news from England,
> But I do prophesy th'election lights
> On Fortinbras. He has my dying voice.

> So tell him, with th'occurrents, more and less,
> Which have solicited - the rest is silence.
> (V, ii, 341-347)

Hamlet, fully aware of Horatio's limitations, recognizes the true essence of his tale shall never be uncovered, the 'rest' shall always remain silence. And surely Shakespeare did not intend *Macbeth* to be seen as an aberration. The death of Macbeth is not the destruction of Evil, it is simply one stage in an ever-moving process. His death merely echoes the Thane of Cawdor's execution in the first act. Thus, the end suggests a certain circularity in which events are only too likely to repeat themselves. *King Lear* remains one of the great tragedies precisely because it leaves unanswered a large number of questions central to its construction. When Kent asks "Is this the promised end?" only to be answered by Edgar's question, "Or image of that horror?", the spectator can only be gripped by an epistemelogical uncertainty that is not elucidated before the end of the play. This is hardly what one would term a "first gleam of a fresh hope and faith." And Edgar's final speech, which concludes the play:

> The weight of this sad time we must obey,
> Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
> The oldest hath borne most; we that are young
> Shall never see so much, nor live so long.
> (V, iii, 324-327)

reveals very little insight and gives no indication the surviving characters have truly benefitted from Lear's example. As Franco Moretti suggests: "The speech of Edgar is the most extraordinary - and appropriate - of anticlimaxes. Its blind mediocrity indicates the chasm that has opened up between facts and words, or more accurately, between referents and signifieds. The close of *King Lear* makes clear that no one is any longer capable of giving meaning to the tragic process; no speech is equal to it, and there precisely lies the tragedy" (55). The presence of choric figures builds up certain expectations on the part of the spectator. Because of their explicatory role - as the individuals who can see through to the heart of the matter - we anticipate that the Chorus, or its counterpart in the novel, will provide us with insights unavailable to the hero. The sense of hope fostered by these expectations serves two paradoxical purposes. It creates a sense of security which allows the spectator to confront the horrors presented in the text, while also ensuring the strongest effect by shattering this confidence in the culmination of the tragic action. [6]

The choric narrators share a similar function in the modern tragic novel. Like Horatio, they attempt to tell the tale of an extraordinary individual and the consequences his actions elicit. The endings of *Moby-Dick*, *Lord Jim*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*, however, are surely as ambiguous as those found in Shakespeare's plays. Ishmael, Marlow, and Quentin do not provide answers - rather, they point to the innate mysteries lying at the heart of the secret cause. The "failure" of the choric figure to make sense of the hero's plight - the inability to get beyond a mere recounting of events - in itself points to the essence of tragedy. We struggle to make meaning of our lives; an ongoing process that ends with our deaths and very little satisfaction. If release does come, it does so through our recognition of the supreme effort made by these individuals to face the dark truths of the human condition and, consequently, of the struggle undergone by the tragic writer to mold this effort into an apprehensible, and comprehensible, form. It is the tragic creation itself that leads to catharsis, as William Brashear notes:

> Tragedy conveys a sense of power, of mastery, of wholeness. It dispels temporarily during its experience the anxiety and anguish that inhere, mainly on a subconscious level, in the fragmentary, the positive, and evasive lives we must live... Tragedy forces us, as I. A. Richards once suggested, to confront the ultimate, to apprehend the same infinite chaos in which we subsist as consciousness; and at the same time tragedy makes it possible to bear this vision. It directs our eyes on the Gorgon's head without danger of petrifaction. For tragedy is an aesthetic mastery by the enlarged consciousness of the inevitable and chaotic forces of the infinite. The audience is awed by the very achievement it beholds and by the dimensions of the mind that accomplished it, and the viewer himself for the duration of the experience undergoes an enlargement. It is this sense of awe in the tragedian's mastery and this enlargement of consciousness that constitute the tragic effect. (5-6)

We gather comfort from the realization that someone has consciously looked into the abyss and told the tale. In order, however, for us to reap the full measure of the experience it must be translated into universally comprehensible terms, thus robbing it of its inherent subjectivity. The experience of the hero is not that of the choric observer - as can be seen in the Hamlet/Horatio and Jim/Marlow couplings - it cannot be. The tragedy of the matter, as Moretti points out, is that in the process of explaining or elaborating upon the event its truths slip away: "Tragedy takes for its object not cognition, but its impossibility " (248). The relationship the spectator "shares" with these figures suggests why catharsis may be primarily an intuitive act.

In this respect, it is apparent that the choric figures reflect the creative impulses of the novelists. Through the choric figure, the tragic writer can clearly delineate the struggle undergone to express the essence of the tragic action - the very effort a symptom of the human condition. Before going any further, however, it is worth quoting Laurence Michel's warning: "Our lusting after comfort - in the form of either intellectual understanding or emotional satisfaction - moves us irresistibly towards words like *acceptance, agreement, reconciliation,* even *Christian resignation, hope, salvation.* But this, while valid for theology or even humanistic ethics, is illegitimately imported into basic or hard-core tragedy" (Thing, 17). The creation of the tragic form, therefore, must not be seen as a "lusting after comfort" - as the tragedian merely exorcising his demons - but as an earnest attempt to grapple with the dark side of the human condition. As Brashear explains:

> The tragedian, if we care to believe Nietzsche, is the supreme *subjective* artist (poet) - not because he deals with what is personal to himself as an individual or proclaims his own arbitrary convictions about things, but because he does not commit the epistemological fallacy of positing a reassuring objective world of things: i.e.,of matter, of ideas, of societies, of values, of morals, of language itself. To him the real fact of human life is the fact of consciousness, infinitely expansive, infinitely chaotic - without boundaries or fixed points of reference, devoid of meaning and significance - and dying. Against this Dionysiac chaos, which admits of no resolution, appeasement, or rationalization, he pits the force of his Apollonian will to sustain the self and resist the suicidal wisdom of Silenus, that the best is not to be - to be nothing. The artistic manifestation of the ensuing dynamic struggle, going on at a primal level of consciousness, is tragedy. (141-2)

The tragic condition exists because of consciousness, the struggle between the dreams of our imagination and the reality of our dark knowledge. Tragedy is the result of a direct confrontation with this knowledge. Having been made aware of the dark truths (that evil springs from good, that the best intentions are doomed to failure, etc...): the unique quality of the hero, and the tragedian for that matter, is the willingness to forge on in the face of such knowledge. [7]

In order for the tragedian to convey the tension created by the acquisition of such knowledge it is neccessary to present moments in the tragic text when the vision breaks free from, and is unencumbered by, the reins placed upon it by the form (if these moments do not occur, we are *not* in the presence of tragedy). At that moment, we feel most deeply the futility of human expression. The dark moment - the appearance of the blind and bloodied

Oedipus, Cordelia's death, the destruction of the Pequod, Kurtz's "the horror," or Leverkühn's interview with the devil - remains fixed in our minds to remind us of our folly. Warwick Wadlington emphasizes the significance of such moments in the tragic text:

> This howl evoked in *Lear* and *Absalom,* or the imagination of that horror, impels creative countermeasures - including both tragic art and theory of it. These weave out from the intractable simple cry an elaboration of fragile threads, making a complexity less obdurate, more endurable to contemplate by its reach into sharable intelligibility and collaborative action: stories, explanations of cause and effect, tracings of philosophical, theological, aesthetic, political, moral, critical implications. Much of this amplification may be immensely difficult and troubling, but it is at least bearable. And in being bearable, it can be capacitating. (187-8)

The tragic form liberates us from the horror that might otherwise overwhelm our senses, and leaves us capable of utilizing our mental faculties to their maximum potential. Yet the very simplicity of the howl, its primal quality, concurrently negates the structures built around it to make it comprehensible. [8] The "dark moment" points to all that the form would attempt to deny - the vision momentarily breaks free from the formal reins placed upon it.

The tragedian's ability to encompass the "dark moment" within the form dictates the greatness of the tragedy. If he is true to his art, as Michel has warned he must be, the tragedian will depict this moment unencumbered by any attempt to lessen or defuse its powers. A sense of "harmony" is created at the moment when a momentary balance is achieved between the horrors of the dark moment and the soothing powers of the form. The dialectic existing between the tragic vision and the form that attempts to encompass it receives its most detailed account in Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*. The tragedian is concerned with depicting the dark moments of the soul without diluting them of their power through description; a concern shared by both Mann's hero and his narrator, Zeitblom. It is human nature to reject or ignore the dark truths of our existence. It is only in those moments of direct confrontation, when the hero, or tragedian, faces those inevitable conclusions that he achieves the *grandeur* or greatness of spirit that allows him to transcend his condition. The conclusion of *Doctor Faustus* suggests a victory over despair, both by Leverkühn and Zeitblom, through formal harmony. The artist's last symphony, the *Lamentation of Dr. Faustus*, and his friend's narrative stand as affirmative symbols against the irreversible truths. It is a fact Zeitblom himself notes as he approaches the conclusion of his narrative:

> Here, towards the end, I find that the uttermost accents of mourning are reached, the final despair achieves a voice, and - I will not say it, it would mean to disparage the uncompromising character of the work, its irremediable anguish to say that it affords, down to its very last note, any other consolation than what lies in voicing it, in simply giving sorrow words; in the fact, that is, that a voice is given the creature for its woe. No, this dark tone-poem permits up to the very end no consolation, appeasement, transfiguration. But take our artist paradox: grant that expressiveness - expression as lament - is the issue of the whole construction: then may we not parallel with it another, a religious one, and say too (though only in the lowest whisper) that out of the sheerly irremediable hope might germinate? It would be but a hope beyond hopelessness, the transcendence of despair - not betrayal to her, but the miracle that passes belief. For listen to the end, listen with me: one group of instruments after another retires, and what remains, as the work fades on the air, is the high G of a cello, the last word, the last fainting sound, slowly dying in a pianissimo-fermata. Then nothing more: silence, and night. But that tone which vibrates in the silence, which is no longer there, to which only the spirit hearkens, and which was the voice of mourning, is so no more. It changes its meaning; it abides as a light in the night. (471)

The "transcendence of despair" - is this not the element upon which all modern tragedy hinges ? The "tone which vibrates in the silence" - is this not where catharsis finds its source ? What is important to note here is Zeitblom's reluctance to name the elusive element which emerges from the form given to the voice of despair. Once again the notion of silence in the face of despair is raised, and seen as the moment when humanity can tear from hopelessness some sense of hope.

What must be resisted at all costs, as Michel has warned, is the desire to temper, and mold these tragic truths to our mortal tolerance. We can easily fool ourselves into believing we are being "true" when, in fact, we are being false. Murray Krieger has expressed the relationship between vision and form definitively: "But fearful and even demoniac in its revelations, the [tragic] vision needed the ultimate soothing power of the aesthetic form which contained it - of tragedy itself - in order to preserve for the world a sanity which the vision itself denied" (Tragic, 3). [9] It is the Unknown, and our own recognition of this innate ignorance/blindness, that is the tragic fact of our existence. In the very act of creating, or explaining (dissecting?) the tragic text, we often envelop it with a language whose qualities negate the very elements which serve to make it so. Laurence Michel explains this dynamic: "...there is a within as well as a without to it, a hard core of negative capacity, a thing contained as well as containers, which is often obscured or distorted in the process of

responding to, and even of creating, what we call tragedies" (Thing, 86). The "thing" may be obscured or distorted and never clearly grasped but, to some degree or another, we are made conscious of its existence. Tragedy helps us to recognize both the inevitable facts of the human condition and the efforts made to endure it. From such recognition springs hope.

To create a great tragedy is to tread that thin line between hope and overwhelming despair. It requires a full-fledged look into the abyss of one's own soul while not succumbing to nihilistic urges, or be driven into a state of inertia. As Brashear notes, it is the ability to resist the desire for not being born when one recognizes the dark facts of our existence. The very effort to shape this recognition into a universally recognized form is the act that can reconcile all of us to our lives. And the presence of the tragic text, the choric figure's narrative, acts as reassurance to the reader. It stands as concrete evidence that life continues after the hero's destruction, and consoles us in the face of dark reality.

In reading the criticism on tragedy there seems to be at least one point on which the majority of critics, perhaps unconsciously, agree - *catharsis* can be seen as the moment of rest that follows those turbulent moments of despair presented in the tragic text. For example, George Steiner says of tragedy: "In certain rare instances, it leads us after destruction to some incomprehensible repose" (9). It is a momentary state wherein the individual is "reconciled" to his fate. Through the events elicited by the actions of the hero comes a sense of acceptance that should not, however, be confused with resignation or despair. The secret cause remains so, the mystery is unsolved, and yet the darkness surrounding it is briefly illuminated. As Normand Berlin states: "Some questions can be answered to eveyone's satisfaction, some - those crucial to the texture of tragedy - can never be answered except by silence. But silence in the presence of mystery, silence produced by facing the fact of mystery, is cathartic, "rest," as we shall come to see" (66). Laurence Michel also stresses the element of rest in the outcome of tragedy. His definition: "Tragedy is consummated when the dream of innocence is confronted by the fact of guilt, and acquiesces therein," resembles a chemical formula describing the collision of two equal forces and the consequent creation of an ensuing void. He states that the "essence of the tragic result is merely a state of being at rest, of being quiet in the face of the mystery brought to epiphany" (Thing, 18). The paradoxical nature of tragedy, whether exemplified in "pity and fear" or Hegel's "thesis-antithesis-synthesis," is not resolvable in any concrete set of terms. Instead, what is manifested is the recognition of the ineffable quality of our

existence, personified by characters who survive the hero yet remain unable to explicate his fate.

The Chorus in Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* succinctly describes the atmosphere of silence and rest that ensues from the tragic confrontation. What is most interesting about Anouilh's concept is his concentration on the sense of "stillness" that pervades the tragic form. In the quiet resolve with which the hero confronts his fate, in the moment of calm in the action when everything hangs in the balance and we sense it will never be the same, we are made aware of the irrevocable nature of the conflict, and of the unavoidable end that awaits both the tragic figure and ourselves. Anouilh suggests the certainty of this knowledge allows us to observe and contemplate the tragic action to its conclusion:

> Tragedy is clean, it is restful, it is flawless... In a tragedy, nothing is in doubt and everyone's destiny is known. That makes for tranquility. There is a sort of fellow-feeling among characters in a tragedy: he who kills is as innocent as he who gets killed: it's all a matter of what part you're playing. Tragedy is restful; and the reason is that hope, that foul, deceitful thing, has no part in it. There isn't any hope. You're trapped. The whole sky has fallen on you, and all you can do about it is shout. Don't mistake me: I said "shout": I did not say groan, whimper, complain. That, you cannot do. But you can shout aloud; you can get all those things said that you never thought you'd be able to say - or never even knew you had it in you to say. And you don't say these things because it will do any good to say them: you know better than that. You say them for their own sake; you say them because you learn a lot from them. (34-5)

Here Anouilh touches upon the communal aspects of tragedy, those elements which link us all to the fate of the tragic hero. [10] The recognition and acceptance of our bond with the hero - his fate similar to, and yet unlike, our own - permits identification to occur, and thus increase the effect. We are made to recognize the irrevocable - the inevitable sense of waste that accompanies the tragic conclusion - and in the process we gain respect for the hero's rebellion in the face of such overwhelming odds.

In those moments when the energy manifested in the struggle is expended and extinguished revelations occur. Up until that point the flurry of activity has prevented any significant meditation or self-reflexion (as usual, Hamlet is the exception). Tragic knowledge stems from the moment the hero recognizes his fate, is reconciled to it, relinquishes any hopes of changing it, and reaps whatever reward he can from his experience. Understanding takes place on more than one level; it is transmitted from hero to

chorus to spectator. *Something* has been gained in the equation. We benefit from the struggle, often by recognizing the effort made by the hero, the observer, or the tragedian. We are inspired, at least momentarily, to shed our everyday vestments, and face the truths, like Lear, in our unaccommodated states. The recognition and acceptance of one's condition in such moments emphasizes the ultimate power and harmonizing qualities of the tragic form.

Endnotes

1. For a general overview of theories of catharsis in the twentieth century, see Adnan K. Abdulla's *Catharsis in Literature*.

2. Krook argues that sympathy for, or with, the tragic hero is not an essential element of tragedy: "To make sympathy with the tragic hero a criterion of tragedy is to take too narrowly personal a view of our experience of tragedy: too personal in the sense of being too subjective. It makes our subjective response - our sympathy or lack of it - the end, not the beginning, of analysis, failing to recognize that at best it is merely a sign, a symptom, a guide or pointer to what is objectively to be taken into account in the tragedy itself: in the present case, the character of the tragic hero and the quality of his suffering" (236-7).

3. Karl Jaspers suggests that we must not feel any gap separating us from the tragic experience: "The whole content is lost if I think myself safe, or if I look upon the tragic as something alien to myself, or as something that might have involved me but that now I have escaped for good. I would then be looking at the world from the safety of a harbor, as if I were no longer risking body and soul on its troubled seas in search of my destiny. I would see the world in terms of grandiose and tragic interpretations: the world is so made that everything great in it is doomed to perish, and it is so made for the delight of the unconcerned spectator" (88). A strong identification with the hero, or the choric observer, is the best element to prevent such withdrawal on the part of the reader.

4. "Il faut que la pensée du héros tragique soit complètement absorbée dans l'illusion tragique; il ne faut surtout pas qu'il nous explique le tragique... Ce n'est pas leur conscience, c'est leur illusion qui est significative: ils sont seuls à ignorer ce que les spectateurs, le monde entier sait déjà."

5. See also Domenach (108-9), and Kermode (7-8).

6. See Kermode who suggests: "The more daring the peripeteia, the more we may feel that the work respects our sense of reality; and the more certainly we shall feel that the fiction under consideration is one of those which, by upsetting the ordinary balance of our naïve expectations, is finding out something for us, something *real*. The falsification of an

expectation can be terrible, as in the death of Cordelia; it is a way of finding something out that we should, on our more conventional way to the end, have closed our eyes to" (18).

7. Brashear, echoing Nietzsche, makes a distinction between the states of reflection and understanding: "Reflection (or speculation) is, then, a single faculty of the conscious mind. *Understanding* in Nietzsche's sense is not a faculty, to be balanced against other faculties, but a level of thought...It is "the apprehension of truth and its terror" by the mind capable of delving below the personal "I" to the universal "I" that dwells "eternally in the ground of being," the mind capable of penetrating the veil of Apollonian illusion and confronting the Dionysiac realm, the vaster consciousness upon which our individual selves precariously float" (17).

8. Of Faulkner's novels, particularly *Light in August* and *Absalom*, Kartiganer notes: "...they affirm the condition of the modern imagination: the conviction that only in courting chaos, only in meeting and interacting with the shapes of its own subversion, does imagination achieve its most brilliant form" (173-4).

9. The stable form of tragedy manages to keep in check the chaotic elements of the found in the tragic vision - most obviously exemplified, as Krieger points out, through the reinstatement of order often depicted at the end of the tragic text: "...the fearsome chaotic necessities of the tragic vision would have to surrender finally to the higher unity which contained them" (Tragic, 4). See also Morrell: "Pleasure there is indeed, but only afterwards, in the feeling of having gained control, partial or complete, over the chaotic experience" (204).

10. See Domenach: "...la tragédie est le spectacle le plus civique qui soit; elle requiert davantage qu'une participation individuelle, un public assez uni par une foi et par une histoire pour pouvoir vibrer au spectacle, un public capable de faire bloc au point de devenir lui-même une sorte de personage; on pourrait dire qu'à la limite la tragédie ne veut pas de spectateurs, mais seulement des acteurs" (66).

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