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THE USES OF MYTH IN FOUR MODERN TRAGÉDIES: 
A DISCUSSION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN 
MYTHIC CONTENT AND THE IDEA OF TRAGEDY 
IN MOBY-DICK, THE PRINCESS CASAMASSIMA, 
THE TRIAL, AND WAITING FOR GODOT

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for 
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate 
School of The Ohio State University

By

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* * * * *

The Ohio State University

1981

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and to Julian, for his guidance
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FIELDS OF STUDY

Tragedy (major field)
Nineteenth-Century British Literature
American Literature to the Civil War
Medieval Literature
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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the following essays is neither to offer a definition of tragedy nor to provide a system or model for analysis or interpretation of tragedy. Rather, it is to describe the mythic content of four very different works—Melville's Moby-Dick, James's The Princess Casamassima, Kafka's The Trial, and Beckett's Waiting for Godot—and to illustrate the relationship between that content and the idea of tragedy in each work, with specific reference to plot and character. As such, these essays are meant to be suggestive rather than conclusive.

The selection of these works is based on three considerations. First, there is some criticism that examines their mythic content, and there is also a body of criticism that examines their status with reference to tragedy, or that "tests" them as tragic works. Given the critical and theoretical literature that has tied tragedy to mythic patterns, it would be valuable and interesting, I think, to explore the relationship between myth and tragedy in these works. I do not wish to apply systematically the ritual formula that has come down to us from the Cambridge school, and that has been
used—very effectively, I think—to analyze such works as *Hamlet* and *Oedipus the King*. Very simply, I do not think that a systematic approach of this kind would be effective or illuminating here. Nevertheless, that these works do draw upon myth, and that they may reasonably be described as tragedies, warrants our attention.

Second, an analysis of this type might shed some light not only on the nature of tragedy but also on the conditions that bear on modern tragedy. Spaced fairly evenly between the middle of the nineteenth and the middle of the twentieth centuries, these works are brilliant reflections of the shape and conditions of modern reality. As such they may speak to us about the nature of tragedy in the modern world. I will touch on this issue throughout, and reserve more pointed discussion of it for the conclusion.

Third, the sheer stature of these authors suggests very strongly, I think, that their common use of myth is of critical as well as historical importance. Much of the greatness in many of the works we consider tragic stems from a dynamic relationship between history and myth. In the hands of the great tragedians the contours of history are universalized into myth, and myth is in turn recrystallized into the historical moment. This can be illustrated, for example, by the politico-mythic evolution in the *Orestes*, in which both Athens and the cosmos absorb the shocks of murder as they coincidentally move toward a more stable conception of justice.
On the other hand, Euripides' *Bacchae* depicts the discontinuity between myth and history: the mythic sacrifice of the god turns into human slaughter. And in *King Lear* the mythic design of Lear's descent and return is the core around which Shakespeare describes the historical and traumatic movement out of a hierarchical social organization. We can see similar connections in each of the works chosen here. In *Moby-Dick*, for example, the quest motif is inextricably related to Melville's examination of nineteenth-century reality. In *The Princess Casamassima* we can recognize the quest motif, a political underworld, and an alluring yet dangerous goddess figure. These elements invite us to see James's portrait of European civilization in both political and mythic terms. In *The Trial* Kafka transforms the heroic quest into a bizarre journey through the musty underworld of the law courts, and this transformation suggests the distorted reality of our world. And in *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett offers us a stark world in which mythic journey and seasonal change unfold against a backdrop of decayed civilization and deteriorated history. What we can say, I think, is that the power of these works—like the power of some great tragedies of the past—seems to derive, at least in part, from their authors' ability to fuse the hardest historical facts and their universal implications in one creative moment. That kind of vision is rare indeed, and we cannot help but learn from it.
Discussions of tragedy are numerous and ultimately, perhaps, inconclusive. Yet the importance of tragedy, or the tragic, is attested to not only by the repeated studies it elicits from literary critics, but by the attention the great observers of mankind, among them Aristotle, Hegel, Goethe, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Freud, have given it. Studies of tragedy have dealt with cosmic rhythm (Nietzsche's alternation between Apollonian *principum individuationis* and Dionysian mystical jubilation), ethical reality (Hegel's primal substance that moves to restore the balance disturbed by the tragic hero), and the foundations of man's individual and racial mind (Bodkin's and Freud's archetypal patterns that are recapitulated in the tragic story). Indeed, the significance of tragedy is such that at times it becomes a measure of a culture's strength. As Walter Kerr writes,

...tragedy has only appeared during those moments in history when man was most exuberantly aware of his freedom....Pericles' Athens was persuaded, temporarily, that it had at last unleashed man's powers toward infinite advancement; Elizabeth's England had discovered to its intense delight that its reach was as great as the great globe itself; Louis' France was confident that the sun in the heavens possessed no more energy, shed no more splendor, than man did.³

Criticism of tragedy abounds in such paradoxical statements of man's nobility, his triumph, his freedom in the face of crushing pain and disaster. And it is for this reason that many recent discussions concerning the very possibility of modern tragedy form a sad commentary on present society.
The explanations offered for the decline of tragedy are manifold and already trite: the boldness with which the Enlightenment defied mysteries to be other than unexplained physical phenomena; the Romantic tendency to explain guilt and evil socially and politically; the Victorian religion of Progress, which made tragedy obsolete; the rise of democracy and decline, not to mention suspicion and fear, of great men; the breakdown of ethical standards. One of the saddest statements on the temper of our age was written by Joseph Wood Krutch:

Our cosmos may be farcical or it may be pathetic but it has not the dignity of tragedy and we cannot accept it as such...

We read but we do not write tragedies. The tragic solution of the problem of existence, the reconciliation to life by means of the tragic spirit is, that is to say, now only a fiction surviving in art. When that art itself has become, as it probably will, completely meaningless, when we have ceased not only to write but to read tragic works, then it will be lost and in all real senses forgotten, since the devolution from Religion to Art to Document will be complete.

But what is often misleading in recent studies of the genre is the implicit use of Greek or Shakespearean tragedy as an absolute standard against which other works fail to compare. We should, I think, allow for the very real possibility that tragedy is not necessarily a fixed category, but a form that may redefine the terms of its own existence while it is also still tied to its past. Nevertheless, Mr. Krutch places Hamlet alongside Ghosts as follows: "...the journey from
Elsinore to Skien is precisely the journey which the human spirit has made, exchanging in the process princes for invalids and gods for disease. In a similar fashion, but with the use of broader historical strokes, Steiner's *The Death of Tragedy* explores the decline of the genre in relation to the salvation held out to man by Christianity (he does, however, make exceptions of Shakespeare and Racine). However, as Sewall points out, Christianity does not preclude tragedy; rather, the Christian experiences of anxiety, isolation, and inadequacy are all themes that emulate tragic expression. The torment of Marlowe's Faustus, his Renaissance will shackled by a Medieval conscience, is witness to the tragic possibilities of a Christian framework. As Sewall states, "What is Christian about Christian tragedy is not eschatological but psychological and ethical.

Another critic who finds that history has done away with tragedy is Lionel Abel. In *Metatheatre*, Abel maintains that dramatic self-consciousness makes tragic action impossible, and that outside of a handful of works, tragedy does not exist as a genre. *Hamlet* becomes a kind of dream play, a projection of human consciousness; Hamlet is a "metahero" in whom self-analysis and contemplation of ambiguity displace tragic action. However, much as the ambiguity of action is relevant and even central to tragedy (indeed, Krieger's *The Tragic Vision* deals with just this point), Abel's proposal is difficult to accept. First, the limitations that he places on the
genre of tragedy are so severe (it is difficult to say exactly which works Abel would call tragic, but the number would be very small) that a possible distinction between tragedy and metatheatre loses its strength. Second, the dramatic self-projection that Abel finds in *Hamlet*, which is so crucial to his thesis as a whole, can be looked at not as a Shakespearean experiment in form but as a recurring theme that operates well within the domain of tragic concerns: the dramatic self-consciousness that we find in Brutus, Macbeth, and Hamlet is a vehicle through which Shakespeare explores the workings of political and cosmic order. Third, the consciousness of the ambiguity of action is not a post-seventeenth century phenomenon; the disjunction between thought and action is at the heart of much Greek tragedy, especially in Sophocles and Euripides.

It is my contention that tragedy is not dead and that we needn't postulate new genres to account for it in the seventeenth, nineteenth, or indeed, the twentieth century. It would of course be foolish to overlook those qualities in modern literature that apparently militate against tragedy: the pervasiveness of pessimism, cynicism, and black humor; the displacement of the noble hero by the passive victim; the sociological and psychological interpretation of evil and guilt. Yet these qualities do not necessarily describe a recipe for a non-tragic age. It would be much wiser, I think, to say that our literature speaks to us in a cultural
and historical idiom that is as different from Shakespeare's as his was from Euripides' and as Euripides' was from Aeschylus' before him—all of which is simply to say that the great tragedian sees much further than most into the nature of his time. This need not force us to alter our conception of tragedy with every succeeding age; rather, we can perhaps say that tragedies of different periods reflect historical and cultural concerns in different and yet in fundamentally similar ways. And mythic material—a pool of timeless images and patterns to which we all have access—may offer us one sense of continuity within the changing world of tragedy.

All of this touches, in one way or another, on the sticky problem of definition. Yet though discussions of tragedy range from its formal and structural elements to its philosophical, psychological, and theological implications, strict definition is rarely attempted. And ultimately, I believe, with good reason. However desirable, we need not and should not expect to be able to formulate a definition of tragedy; though we can usually recognize a work as "tragic," the genre involves a complex of elements, themes, and relationships that defy strict demarcation. Morris Weitz, in Hamlet and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism, does us all a service by applying Wittgenstein's work in linguistic philosophy to illustrate the problems involved in definition and interpretation. But as Weitz notes, our
inability to define a genre does not preclude intelligent discussion. The advances made in atomic research cannot but astonish; nevertheless, the mathematics upon which that research depends relies in turn on principles that have yet to be proven. Certainly we need not expect precise definition from literary criticism, which deals with material that is emotional, ambiguous, and often nebulous. Nor need we go outside literary criticism for analogies. Studies of the romance are not as old as those of tragedy but are nevertheless quite numerous. In a recent study, The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries, Dieter Mehl, after finding that distinctions between the romance, saint's legend, and chronicle break down under scrutiny, proceeds to discuss romances on the basis of their lengths. We should not, however, throw our hands up in despair; but neither should we feel compelled to draw a Venn diagram of tragedy, to find a core of elements and properties that are common to all works which we so designate. Literature and its study do not operate by scientific method; nor should we desire that they do so.

Nevertheless, the whole question of modern tragedy has stimulated a number of critics to reexamine the definitional bases of the criticism of tragedy. In 1961, the same year in which Steiner proclaimed The Death of Tragedy and one year before John von Szeliski's Tragedy and Fear: Why Modern Tragic Drama Fails, Oscar Mandel published A Definition of Tragedy.
A formidable and comprehensive study that focuses on definitional problems and, as the title indicates, offers a working definition:

A work of art is tragic if it substantiates the following situation: A protagonist who commands our earnest good will is impelled in a given world by a purpose, or undertakes an action, of a certain seriousness and magnitude; and by that very purpose or action, subject to that same given world, necessarily and inevitably meets with grave spiritual or physical suffering.

While Mandel's work is admirable and his organization and rejection of previous studies and definitions of tragedy are illuminating and useful, his economical conception of tragedy has its drawbacks. As a definition, as the lowest common denominator of tragedy, the information we gain when it is applied is limited; although it allows us to reject those works that fail to meet its criteria (Julius Caesar, for example) it tells us little about those works that do fit the definition but are obviously quite different substantively (King Lear, Caligula, and The Trial, for example). Moreover, though we should be able to apply the definition to any work from any historical period, it tends to work against a number of modern works that could reasonably be described as tragic. One reason why this is so is that some works that emulate the tragic design involve characters who strain our "earnest good will" because of the extreme nature of their personalities (Myshkin, Stavrogin, Ahab, Caligula, Meursault, etc.). Furthermore, the criterion which states that a protagonist must
be impelled by a purpose or by an action of seriousness and magnitude operates against the modern concern for the possibilities and limits of action, as in the existential works of Sartre and Camus or the paralyzed world of Beckett; indeed, one could trace a development from Aeschylus' Orestes, who acts and suffers, to Hamlet, who is saved from a tragedy of consciousness through action, down to Didi and Gogo, for whom all action has solidified into waiting. Finally, though it is relatively easy to reject those studies of tragedy that posit a priori ethical systems or those that focus on the emotional effects of tragedy, certainly our immediate response, and probably our ultimate response as well, is of an emotional nature; it is a shortsighted argument which claims that we can judge tragic status by considerations other than ethical or emotional. Indeed Aristotle, the chief source for Mandel's non-metaphysical investigation of the genre, locates the function of tragedy not merely in the arousal of pity and fear but in their purgation as well.

Mandel has even less patience with the position that links tragedy to myth, a view that I will of course lean on heavily in these essays:

...if Aristotle...had forgotten the primitive origins and the mythical significance of Greek tragedy, we may safely follow him, and listen to Hamlet without expecting in our souls echoes of primeval rages or aboriginal satisfactions. The origin of an object is not the same thing as its substance. In Hamlet, the Vegetation God is not only transcended, but, like a snake's skin, molted, abandoned, and forgotten.15
The claim that Hamlet is solely a vegetation ritual is obviously ludicrous. Nevertheless, it is an uncomfortably bold argument that categorically rejects the significance of myth in tragedy. Indeed, it is in those works that nearly every critic uses to illustrate the principles or definition of tragedy, Oedipus the King and Hamlet, that the presence of an informing mythic element is most strongly felt.

I do not wish to imply here that tragedy necessarily depends on myth for its foundation, or that we should look to mythic elements to seek out the "meaning" of tragedies; however, it is my contention that the coincidence of mythic and tragic material, in past works as well as in the works discussed here, is worthy of our attention. In addition, if the following essays are successful, they will suggest, I think, two important things: first, that the presence of mythic material in some recent tragedies may be one way in which they can be related to some tragedies of the past; and second, that the particular uses to which myth is put in these tragedies also reveals obvious differences between the tragic vision then and the tragic vision now.
FOOTNOTES


Each of these works has been described as a tragedy, and some of them figure significantly in discussions of the theory of tragedy. Moby-Dick appears prominently as an illustration of tragedy in these discussions of the genre: Murray Krieger, The Tragic Vision: Variations on a Theme in Literary Interpretation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966); Richard Sewall, The Vision of Tragedy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); and Henry Alonzo Myers, Tragedy: A View of Life (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1956). W.H. Auden's "The Christian Tragic Hero: Contrasting Captain Ahab's Doom and Its Classic Greek Prototype," in Lionel Abel,
ed., Moderns on Tragedy: An Anthology of Modern and Relevant Opinions on the Substance and Meaning of Tragedy (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, 1967), pp. 40-44, suggests that Ahab's is a "Christian" as opposed to a "Greek" tragedy.


Waiting for Godot generates similar controversy. Walter Kaufmann, Tragedy and Philosophy (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1969), calls Waiting for Godot "a satyr play"; Oscar Mandel, A Definition of Tragedy (New York: New York University Press, 1961), argues that Waiting for Godot is not a tragedy because the play denies heroic purpose and stature; and Charles Glicksberg, The Tragic Vision in Twentieth-Century Literature, suggests that Waiting for Godot cannot be tragic because it "The quest for meaning...can never break out in revolt." Yet there are those who describe Waiting for Godot as tragic. To Frederick R. Karl, "Waiting for Beckett: Quest and Re-Quest," Sewanee Review, 69 (Autumn 1961), 661-76, Beckett's characters are "comic characters in a tragic world"; Jacques Dubois, "Beckett and Ionesco: The Tragic Awareness of Pascal and the Ironic Awareness of Flaubert," Modern Drama, 9 (December 1966), 283-91, is more explicit: Beckett gives "the tragic dimension to two tramps"; and Gábor Mihályi, "Beckett's 'Godot' and the Myth of Alienation," Modern Drama, 9 (December 1966), 277-82, suggests that the inevitability of Godot's absence and the inevitability of the tramps' wait suggest the inevitability found in Greek, French, or Shakespearean tragedy; and while Ramona Cormier and Janis L. Pallister, "En attendant Godot:
Tragedy or Comedy?" L'Esprit Créateur, 11 (Fall 1971), 44-54, argue that the play's "lack of plot or of action is all important in excluding Godot from conventional tragedy," they go on to describe the play an "an ultra-modern tragedy" in which "man's situation itself, neither remediable nor provoked by human manipulation... is tragic"--a view they further modify by suggesting that the horror of man's condition, as portrayed in Waiting for Godot, perhaps becomes, in turn, the source of "black comedy at its blackest."


6 Krutch, p. 132.


8 Sewall, p. 73.


13 Mandel, p. 20.

14 The broad categories into which Mandel divides studies of tragedy are "derivative definitions" (those which postulate an order from which tragedy manifests, as in the discussions
of Nietzsche and Hegel) and "substantive definitions," which include definitions by "formal elements," "situation," "ethical direction," and "emotional effect" (p. 11). Those authors whose works fall into the "substantive" category include Aristotle, Krutch, Weisinger, Schopenhauer, and Mandel himself.

15 Mandel, p. 19.
MOBY-DICK: MYTH, HISTORY, AND THE IDEA OF TRAGEDY

Around the two great characters in Moby-Dick, Ahab and Ishmael, Melville constructs two distinct versions of experience: mythic and historical. In the opening chapter Ishmael is firmly situated temporally; he notes the crowds of Manhattan, the attraction of Niagara and Rockaway Beach, and his own preference to go to sea as a wage-earning sailor. In sharp contrast Melville delineates Ahab, who calls to mind, either directly or indirectly, the transhistorical characters of Prometheus and Satan. Ahab is a descendant of those titanic, superhuman personalities. Their defiance is mythic and their battles are fought with gods. We rarely think of Ahab as an American in the sense that we think of Ishmael as one. Although he is the captain of a whaler, he speaks to us in a different language; we move from Ishmael's fluid Yankee narrative to Ahab's Quaker idiom and Shakespearean cries. Ishmael tells us that "the world's a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete," and that he loves "to sail forbidden seas, and land on barbarous coasts." Such statements, as well as the method and style of Ishmael's narrative as a whole, suggest the historical freedom and open-endedness that we associate with the American spirit--the journey away from Europe and her traditions, into the
wilderness and the west, America's geographical and spiritual destiny. How differently the voice of Ahab strikes us, when, on the second day of the chase, he tells Starbuck: "This whole act's immutably decreed. 'Twas rehearsed by thee and me a billion years before this ocean rolled. Fool! I am the Fates' lieutenant; I act under orders. Look thou, underling! that thou obeyest mine" (MD, p. 459). Woven into the fabric of Moby-Dick is this tension between Ishmael's fluid, expansive response to experience, and Ahab's sense of the determined shape of events, the inevitability that is Ahab's life. Much of the novel's drama is thematically and stylistically generated in the oscillation between Melville's heroes and in the oscillation between the two forms of experience that they represent.

Between these two conceptions of experience Melville dramatizes the consequences of a profound change in the meaning of history. For in broad terms we might say that as the theological basis of history weakened, eighteenth and nineteenth-century philosophy increasingly sought to restore a spiritual design to history by describing it as both evolutionary and providential. This is evident in the historicism of Schlegel, Hegel, and Carlyle in Europe, and of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman in America; the historical consciousness of each of these writers is marked by a reconciliation between mundane history and providential design. But in the movement from Ahab to Ishmael—that is, in the movement from a mythic to a historical model—Melville suggests the failure
of philosophy to describe a spiritually cohesive history and reveals the dreadful split between mundane history and providential design that so marks the consciousness of the twentieth century. With the force of its symbolic, apocalyptic flood, Moby-Dick illustrates the end of one era and the traumatic birth of another. In the inexorable movement of the novel's final pages, Ahab disappears beneath the waves, mysteriously bound to the indefatigable whale. With Ahab disappears the conviction, desperately formulated--reaffirmed by Ahab, as it were, in its dying hour--that there exists for man a continuity between historical time and mythic time. When Ishmael resurfaces he is carried into a new world, one in which heaven and earth have been permanently sundered. An orphan and outcast, he now bears that modern malady which Eliade calls the "terror of history."²

The mythic elements that inform the character of Ahab and his hunt are unmistakable. The whale is a traditionally symbolic creature. In the Odyssey Homer refers to the whale as a "demon";³ other myths associate the whale with storms, lightning, and thunder;⁴ in the Bible the whale represents both God and Satan. "Whiteness" is mythically rich and mythically ambiguous: white is the symbolic color of mythological deities and is associated with purity; on the other hand, it is symbolic of storm demons and associated with death.⁵ Melville also uses omens to enrich the mythic dimension of the voyage: the captain of the Goney drops his trumpet at the
mention of the white whale; the ship encounters a squid and later a tempest. The devil-pact, too, is part of the novel's mythic machinery; like Faust and Mephistopheles, Ahab and Fedallah strike "a swap or a bargain." Ahab, too, may stem from the "Wild Huntsman"—a godless person who used heathen charms in his hunt of a mythological animal. The rhythm of the quest is, of course, central to the mythic pattern. Eliade describes a class of myths that seem to be prototypes of Ahab's chase: "A large number of myths feature...a hero being swallowed by a sea monster and emerging through the monster's belly." The quest is structurally central to some of Melville's earlier work, too, and as such suggests a significant impulse in his imaginative design. Typee recounts the search for a geographical center, and Redburn seeks to establish a paternal stasis. Each repeats a mythic voyage that attempts to capture a sacred, transhistorical origin. In Moby-Dick the White Whale is the symbolic equivalent of that "origin"; in mythic terms, it is the axis mundi or "world navel."

The arrival at the sacred origin is the central experience in mythic and ritual patterns. Eliade describes, for example, a primitive ritual that introduces the child into the "sacramental reality of the world": "The newborn child is...made a witness to a series of 'beginnings.' And one cannot 'begin' anything unless one knows its 'origin,' and how it first came into being." A sacred, magical power is
attached to the knowledge and experience of origins. One may consider, in this connection, the place of the child in Romantic poetry (Wordsworth's "Mighty Prophet! Seer Blest!") or the psychoanalytical "magic" (therapy) effected through the re-experience of psychosexual origins. Mythically, the "world navel" is the source of all creation, beyond the individual and opposite forms of reality. Joseph Campbell describes it in this way:

...it yields the world's plenitude of both good and evil. Ugliness and beauty, sin and virtue, pleasure and pain, are equally its production. ¹⁰

The "world navel" assumes various symbolic forms, and the hero's successful passage through the navel signifies his transcendence of earthly polarities and his simultaneous apprehension and creation of the divine force that is within those individual forms; in other words, the hero establishes the divine sanction of nature and time. This is the mythic import of the rescue of Troy and Hesione by Herakles, who descended into and emerged from a sea monster that plagued the city. ¹¹ Again, it is the meaning behind Jason's successful maneuvering of the Argo through the Symplegades. And, of course, it is the central fact of Christ's crucifixion, the cross (axis mundi) symbolizing the redemptive convergence of temporal existence and divine life.

Ahab's physical wounds recall those suffered by other mythic heroes—the liver repeatedly torn from Prometheus, the
spear-wound in the dying Christ—and denote the physical and spiritual agony of the hero's passage. But Ahab's confrontation with Moby Dick also signals his arrival at the world axis (in the language of the novel, he has dived the deepest), and his unyielding effort to pierce the wall of the whale is also his maniacal desire to affirm the divine order behind existence. The world of the whale is incomprehensible and paradoxical. As Ahab notes in "The Quarter-deck," however,

All visible objects...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. (MD, p. 144)

Though the novel insists on Ahab's absolutism, it also forces us to come to terms with the ambiguities that shape his characterization. Certainly the critical vocabulary often used to describe Ahab—especially terms such as "demonic" and "monomaniacal"—seems inappropriate for a hero who seeks divine order, although there can be little doubt that such terminology is more or less accurate. Looked at from another angle of vision, however, we can say that the juxtaposition of the divine and the demonic is not only appropriate but inescapable, and that Melville forged Ahab in just such a paradox. For the mythic drama, because it plunges to the heart of life, naturally examines the mysterious realm between the individual and collective life, between man and god, between freely determined action and the shape of destiny; it is not
surprising, then, that "ungodly, god-like" Ahab, whose ship is associated with Satan, also appears before Ishmael "with a crucifixion in his face" (MD, p. 111). The same paradoxical balance allows us to view Ahab as both a supreme egotist who sees himself reflected in the doubloon; and a martyr who considers the possibility that he is the agent of god's vengeance. By informing the creation and life of his character with mythic paradox, Melville leads us to a realm perhaps best described by Kierkegaard's "god-relationship"—the absolute confrontation of man and god, the finite and the eternal—a condition marked by passion, uncertainty, and despair because its significance and validity can be known neither experientially nor empirically. In the "god-relationship" it is quite impossible to distinguish madness from truth; more pertinent to Ahab, however, it is also conceivable that an idolater may be worshiping truly, and vice versa. 12 This is so because, according to Kierkegaard, "truth is subjectivity"—one can consider in this connection Ahab standing before the doubloon—and therefore can only be defined objectively in terms that are uncertain and paradoxical. That ambiguity and paradox is present, for example, in Father Mapple's sermon when he warns "Woe to him who would not be true, even though to be false were salvation!" (MD, p. 50). In the primitive confrontation of man and eternal truth (i.e., god), descriptive categories collapse because the eternal can only be measured against itself.
The consistently mythic presentation of Ahab is particularly significant and poignant given the philosophical and spiritual turmoil of the nineteenth century. The function of the mythic hero is to pierce the shifting reality of profane time and to participate in—indeed to create—the absolute continuity between man, nature, and god, between temporal and sacred history. But Ahab's urgent attempt to assert a coherent and absolute universe comes at a time when life appeared increasingly fragmented and when truth appeared increasingly relative. The fixed symmetry of Newtonian physics, for example, was giving way to a cosmos that was less stable and more emergent; the basis of cosmology was shifting from "being" to "becoming." The literature of the age testifies to the ramifications of this shift as it examines the ethical and philosophical implications of a universe governed by matter, energy, and process. What Langbaum calls the "poetry of experience," for example, is the nineteenth-century poetic attempt to establish a moral and epistemological validity which is measured not by external law but by the perceptual movement—the "experience"—of poetry itself. A number of nineteenth-century authors attempt to accommodate a universe which, though wondrously diverse and dynamic, seems to have wrenched itself free of any ethical or physical order. Much of the poetry of Tennyson, Arnold, and Hopkins, for example, attempts to establish a philosophical outlook which will at least hold together a diverse and metamorphic
universe and at most affirm its ethical unity. Tennyson articulates such a position, for example, in the cosmic evolution at the end of *In Memoriam*; Arnold steps back from disconnectedness and atomism into what he calls "the general life" (a movement toward a broader base that parallels Arnold's personal shift from poet to essayist); and Hopkins finds comprehensiveness in the authority of the Roman Catholic Church and ethical order in the "immortal diamond." A similar impulse is present in American consciousness: Emerson's dynamically fluxional universe is dialectically comprehended in the Oversoul.

From his historical vantage, Melville was able to foresee that the ideological momentum of his century would inevitably lead to a breach between nature and history on the one hand and theology on the other. Melville points to this even before the narrative begins, in the "Extracts" section: in more or less chronological order, we move from Biblical creation through the nineteenth century, playfully sampling theological, cultural, literary, and scientific passages that deal with whales. We begin with the divine sanction of the whale ("And God created great whales"), but eventually we are taken through Paley's natural theology and Darwin's *Voyage of a Naturalist*, and finally to a lyrical homage to the whale's power and independence:
"Oh, the rare old whale, mid storm and gale
    In his ocean home will be
A giant in might, where might is right,
    And King of the boundless sea."  (MD, p. 11)

The historical context thus highlights the urgency—and majesty—of Ahab's mythic hunt. In a world undergoing vast spiritual change, Ahab seeks to confirm the existence of a divine and moral sanction to nature and history. The same context that makes Ahab seem so foreign to us, however, makes Ishmael a familiar character. His world is very similar to that which haunts and inspires so many nineteenth-century writers. In this respect his description of the whale is typical. To Ishmael Moby Dick is perhaps nature itself: dynamic but enigmatic, alluringly beautiful but malignant, horribly independent of ethical design. And, like many of the authors of his century, Ishmael attempts to shape a comprehensive but resilient vision, one that accommodates the disjunction between nature and moral order. To do so he brings to bear on the whale an eclecticism of history, science, art, and rhetoric, all suffused with a comic expansiveness and tempered by "a wisdom that is woe." Ishmael's vision is multiform and plastic; as he says, he tries to be social with every horror. Much of Ishmael's ability to come to terms with existence derives from his capacity to absorb the ambiguities of natural data, to reformulate and articulate that data, indeed to joyously and linguistically participate in its creation. Ishmael's "cetology," for example,
aesthetically sorts—and indeed reconstructs—a variety of whales. But as comprehensive as his cetological system is, he leaves room for the uncertain. The fixed definitions of his whales are balanced by an open-ended fluidity: "...I now leave my cetological System standing thus unfinished..." (MD, p. 127). Though precariously established, this balance between the fixed and the fluid, between what is known and what cannot be known, is the informing principle of Ishmael's perception. This is apparent, for example, in the chapter "The Tail." Ishmael very precisely notes that the sperm whale's tail is composed of "three distinct strata" (MD, p. 314), and that "Five great motions are peculiar to it" (MD, p. 315). Yet he notes, too, the metamorphic quality of the tail, the elastic grace of its motion, "where infantileness of ease undulates through a Titanism of power" (MD, p. 315). And Ishmael ends the chapter with a physical image that echoes profoundly throughout the novel: "Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will" (MD, p. 318).

I have called Ishmael a "historical" character, and indeed the rhetorical and philosophical versatility with which he examines the elusive whale reflects a nineteenth-century effort to establish a secure yet fluid metaphysics, one that can comprehend an increasingly uncertain world. What strikes us in Ishmael is the breadth and depth of his vision. Ishmael becomes wondrously eloquent when he stands before the whale as
anthropologist, philosopher, historian, anatomist, or artist. With comic relish for the particular he measures the skeleton of the whale, noting "that the spine of even the hugest of living things tapers off at last into simple child's play" (MD, p. 378); as he observes the precariously tense balance of the Pequod, counterpoised by the heads of a right whale and a sperm whale, he notes that our philosophical heritage traps us between Locke and Kant; and, in the haunting whiteness of the whale, he sees the horrible conjunction of nature's dynamic fullness and spectral pallor— the "colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink" (MD, p. 169). Ishmael's whale is unsourced and eternal and also unknowable— "no face; he has none, proper" (MD, p. 292). If this whale inspires the most lyrical passages in the novel, it also brings into focus such fundamental questions as the knowability of space: "...as for this whale spout, you might almost stand in it, and yet be undecided as to what it is precisely" (MD, pp. 312-13). But Ishmael stands before the paradoxes of reality with historical and scientific intellect, wisdom, and comic elasticity that accommodates— however tenuously— the uncertainties of this world.

Of course, Ishmael is not only a nineteenth-century character, but a particularly American one. In Ishmael we immediately recognize the virility of the Yankee spirit. As A.N. Kaul suggests, Melville— and on this point we may identify Ishmael and Melville— was "hopelessly ungenteel and as
If the salvation Ishmael offers us is the precarious, Siamese ligature of the monkey-rope, its style is nonetheless typically American: perilous but humorous, what one would expect on the great physical and metaphysical adventure of American whaling or American pioneering. The central confidence of Ishmael's rhetoric suggests, too, his kinship with his Transcendental contemporaries. "Let us build altars to the Beautiful Necessity," says Emerson in "Fate," as he notes that although space and time are vast, life remains familiar and unified through eternity. No doubt Ishmael has profound reservations concerning the optimism and freedom that marked the Transcendental embrace of a providentially inspired and directed nature. From the mast head he warns Pantheists of the imminent horror of "Descartian vortices" (MD, p. 140). Nevertheless, if in Emerson contradictions are caught in the synthesis of the Oversoul, in Ishmael they are buoyantly though tenuously comprehended in a vision which acknowledges the ethical discontinuity of the world but which also moves toward personal transcendence. Ishmael's response to the problem of doubt and suffering, for example, absorbs and transcends heavenly light and demonic shadow, golden sun and dismal swamp, and finds articulation in the beautiful image of the Catskill eagle:
...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. (MD, p. 355)

That personal transcendence is present, as well, in this passage:

And thus, though surrounded by circle upon circle of consternations and affrights, did these inscrutable creatures at the centre freely and fearlessly indulge in all peaceful concernments; yea, serenely revelled in dalliance and delight. But even so, amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still for ever centrally disport in mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve round me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy. (MD, p. 326)

If transcendentalism posits the spiritual fusion of mind, nature, and history, Ishmael explores their disconnectedness ("I know him not, and never will...I say again he has no face"). Nevertheless, in the aesthetic vision that Ishmael brings to bear on a shifting and mysterious universe we can detect the inheritance—much changed, to be sure—of the aesthetic design which nineteenth-century thought often gave to nature and history in an attempt to reconstruct the spiritual and ethical continuity of an apparently random universe.¹⁹

In Moby-Dick faith in aesthetic design, in the invisible, guiding hand of history, is impossible because the whale is not only eternally undecipherable but also malignant. Yet
although Ishmael articulates no overall faith in nature or history, he tries to accommodate a morally discontinuous universe in the empirical absorption and artistic recreation of moment to moment existence. In this way, Ishmael applies an aesthetic mode not to the generation of organic design but to the apprehension of fragmented experience.

In light of the terribly evasive reality that is apprehended and articulated in the novel, it seems fair to say that in Ishmael Melville offers us a character who is all we could hope or expect to be. This is implicit, I think, in his survival. The wall of Moby Dick is the unyielding "givenness" of reality. We may try to avoid that wall, or we may stare ourselves blind looking at it; we may dash our brains against it, or we may, like Bartleby, curl up and die before it. But if there is one certainty, emphasized by the urgent rhythm of the novel, it is that the landless, truth-seeking man tries to come to terms with that reality. And Ishmael's vision is wise, versatile, and vitally plastic, a profoundly American solution to an unstable, uncertain world. Ishmael's chemistry is a dynamic solution of Starbuck's faith and Stubb's vitality, of Flask's common sense and Queequeg's social mysticism. Through protean Ishmael Melville articulates an ontology which retains faith while it avoids dogma, preserving mystery and poetry in a universe empirically apprehended. Ishmael plumbs the transcendental vision and continually emerges skeptical but buoyant, tenuously poised, within
the Emersonian and American drama of man and nature, between the enchantment of spirit and the horror of blank matter.

Be that as it may, if Ishmael's survival is implicitly affirmative, it is also lonely and fearful, and it is certainly the fearfulness of modern life that we, as well as Ishmael, are born into. For in the final chapters of the novel, two worlds part: one belongs to Ahab and is forged in myth; the other is Ishmael's, and his world is also our world. In this way Moby-Dick probes the heart of a world experiencing vast spiritual change. In a world in which God is inaccessible Ishmael absorbs the shocks and shifts of brutal nature while he squeezes the sperm of universal brotherhood. Against this spiritual resilience, however, Melville highlights Ahab's desperate and violent attempt to confirm the existence of a divine and moral sanction to nature. Where Ishmael tries to socialize with nature, even at its fiercest—and that, in itself, is the existential challenge to modern man—Ahab rejects and defies those walls and masks which separate man from divine principles. Ahab opposes and rejects the facelessness of reality: "That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate" (MD, p. 144). In effect Ahab rejects the cosmology of the age and the need to approach life with spiritual compromise and accommodation. He rejects the condition of precarious balance which Ishmael describes in this way: "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" (MD, p. 314). Ahab rejects Ishmael's fluid reality and the need to accommodate that reality with a tenuously fluid responsiveness. As Ahab tells the carpenter, "I like to feel something in this slippery world that can hold, man" (MD, p. 390). No doubt the future belongs to Ishmael--indeed, the rhythm of the novel assures us of this. No doubt, too, Melville endorses Ishmael fully, and offers us, as I've already noted, a character who is all we can hope to be. But along with Ishmael we are left outcast and adrift, spiritual orphans who wait to be rescued by the "devious-cruising Rachel." In Ishmael's survival Melville gives us cause to celebrate, but he also seems to suggest the limits, fragility--and indeed the inevitable collapse--of those nineteenth-century philosophical habits that attempt, but ultimately fail, to describe an ethically and spiritually cohesive universe.

In this way Melville constructs the traumatic shift from an older to a modern consciousness and cosmology--for in Ahab we lose the expression of absolute order, and we are all, as products of that historical shift, spiritual orphans. The apocalyptic drama of the novel's final pages signifies the end of one age and the beginning of another. In the power, violence, and majesty of Ahab's final encounter, climaxed when Tashtego nails the heavenly bird to the sinking ship, we experience the final drama of theologically-defined
existence, a drama that vibrates between damnation and blessedness. Then the walls of the vortex collapse, and the great sea rolls on "as it rolled five thousand years ago" (MD, p. 469); we are witness to a flood that divides history as did its Biblical archetype. The new man is modern man, Ishmael, who exists not between heaven and hell but between survival and accommodation. Yet the novel insists—and herein lies much of its beauty—on the affirmation that is at the heart of Ishmael's existence. For given the reality that presents itself so nakedly and brutally to modern man, the nature of his survival approaches celebration. At the same time, however, we realize our spiritual orphanhood, made all the more prominent when thrown into relief against the majesty of Ahab and his quest. It is then that we realize our spiritual loss and the unalterable burden of modern life.

If there exists a vital relationship between tragedy and its historical moment, then it is possible that Moby-Dick, as it takes us through the spiritual dislocation of its age, also speaks to us concerning the nature of the tragic vision that embodies its action. That it does so is most notably a function of the structural and thematic oscillation between Ishmael and Ahab and the shifting definition of reality described by that movement. We are accustomed, for example, to the sense of closure that rounds out great tragedies; indeed, it is the central strength of the tragic rhythm that a world in apparent collapse inexorably moves towards what Frye calls
"an epiphany of law." In *Moby-Dick* that epiphany is forged in the tragi-mythic confrontation between Ahab and divine law—a defiance that paradoxically confirms cosmic order, indeed participates in its creation. Unlike most tragedies, however, *Moby-Dick* moves through and beyond its central tragic rhythm and comes to uncertain rest on Queequeg's coffin. We shift in fact from a conception of reality that is manifestly absolute to one that is fundamentally discontinuous. And in this shift Melville not only suggests the spiritual crisis taking shape in his century; he also traces the splitting of design from history, and thereby suggests the philosophical pressure that the tragic vision experiences in the context of modern reality.

This can be illustrated in the case of Ishmael. In the main, he is a comic character, able to resiliently absorb and accommodate reality and thereby reconcile himself with it. Yet he also approaches the tragic condition. This is suggested, I think, by the way in which the movement of the novel narrows and finally seems to undermine his comic freedom. Melville suggests this in the urgency of the shift, towards the end of the novel, from narrative to dramatic presentation, which reflects a formal pressure that implies Ishmael's failure to absorb Ahab's mythic drama. In this way Melville describes the vitality of historical freedom—of "freedom of the mind"—and yet at the same time suggests the terror of that freedom. The total action of Ishmael's
narrative, therefore, broadly suggests the salient and paradoxical features described by much of modern literature: man's haunted freedom and the shapeless universe in which he lives. (It suggests, furthermore, the re-emergence of the tragic-comic mode: as historical creatures we are apparently free to create the conditions of our existence and yet we are eternally unredeemable. Our formless freedom in turn implies the possibility of comic or sinister consequences: we seem to waver between the embrace of freedom, which leads to a vital and joyous anarchy, or to its inversion, nihilism, and the need for structure and form, which too often leads to despair and totalitarianism.)

Yet there is a broader and more profound fact suggested and explored in the overall presentation of the novel: that aesthetic resolution may come to displace ethical claim (or tragic commitment) in a morally ambiguous and unsure universe. In this way Moby-Dick reflects the historical "devolution from Religion to Art" and the crisis that breeds. We move from a philosophical condition that affirms the continuity of ethical argument and aesthetic comprehension to one that suggests their essential discontinuity: aesthetic comprehension alone can offer the semblance of a structured universe because ethical claim is immeasurable and uncertain. As teller of the tale, the central consciousness that attempts to absorb all experience, Ishmael gives aesthetic form to the violent and ambiguous reality discovered in the Pequod's passage.
Ishmael is part Ancient Mariner, part Horatio, and part Greek chorus. His is a fluid, absorbent consciousness that attempts to assimilate the entire range of experience between the comic and the tragic. Committed to no particular view, he tries to accommodate all reality. It is chiefly for this reason that Ishmael is so accessible to the modern temper.

For just as the shift in the novel from narrative to dramatic presentation suggests the inability of Ishmael to encompass Ahab, so too the tension and final vision of the novel indicate the schism between tragic choice and artistic—we might also say spiritual—accommodation. Ishmael enacts the fate of historical man, who begins in freedom—and indeed keeps it—but ends a spiritual outcast. The implicit contrast is Ahab, whose freedom is of course circumscribed, but who paradoxically participates in the creation of universal structure.
FOOTNOTES

1 Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, ed. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1967), p. 44. Future references are to this edition and will be parenthetical in the text.


4 Stanonik, p. 86.


6 Stanonik, pp. 129-33.


8 Eliade, Myth and Reality, p. 33.

9 Eliade, Myth and Reality, p. 33.


11 Campbell, p. 91.


In the Prologue to *In Memoriam A.H.H.* Tennyson looks forward to a time when mind and soul "May make one music as before,/ But Vaster." The image of "broken music" is also quite significant in *Idyls of the King*. Arnold bids Marguerite "A Farewell" in order to seek "Clear prospect o'er our being's whole." The sense of metamorphic reality is evident in Hopkins' language and rhythm, especially in "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection."

From "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire":

...Million-fueled, nature's bonfire burns on.
But quench her bonniest, dearest to her, her clear-
est-selved spark
Man, how fast his firedint, his mark on mind, is gone!
Both are in an unfathomable, all is in an enormous dark
Drowned. O pity and indignation! Manshape, that shone
Sheer off, dissemble, a star, death blots black out; nor mark
Is any of him at all so stark
But vastness blurs and time beats level. Enough!
The Resurrection,
A heart's-clarion! Away grief's gasping, joyless days, dejection.
Across my foundering deck shone
A beacon, an eternal beam. Flesh fade, and mortal trash
Fall to the residuary worm; world's wildfire, leave but ash:
In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,
Is immortal diamond.


One can consider here not only the American Transcendentalists but also Carlyle, for example.
In a world of gratuitous disaster and nearly total devastation we can with little qualification consider sheer survival an affirmative condition.


THE PRINCESS CASAMASSIMA: MYTH, POLITICS, AND THE IDEA OF TRAGEDY

In the course of history there are times which, by virtue of the intensity and interplay of cultural, political, scientific, or spiritual forces, take on the aura of legend and myth. And whether we experience the turbulence of these periods immediately or as a kind of aftershock, we sense that both individual and collective life have somehow changed because of it. Such times signal an end or a beginning—the two become indistinguishable—and a transition from one "sense of life" to another. In the eighteenth century the French Revolution was of such moment that it sometimes appeared as both history and myth. Recalling the passion and hopefulness of revolutionary France, Wordsworth tells us that "Not favoured spots alone, but the whole Earth,/ The beauty wore of promise."¹ In our own time the assassination of President Kennedy and the turmoil of the sixties already appear to have taken on mythic dimensions. The explanation for the mythicizing of events or periods is not hard to find. It is simply that at such times we are affected in both the most acutely personal and the broadest communal sense, and we feel, too, that the rhythms of our hearts and minds and those of the world around us coincide.
To Henry James, Europe in the 1870's and 1880's must have appeared on the brink of events that would be larger than life. One novel that he wrote at this time, The Princess Casamassima, while it focuses on England, is European in scope, and describes a civilization that faces imminent radical and violent change. In this novel society is more or less divided into two worlds that can no longer coexist. There are the haves and the have-nots, the upper orders and "the people," country estates and tenements, the world of light, art, and refinement and the dark underworld of poverty, political agitation, and anarchy. To be sure, there are characters who fall neither on one side nor the other; if this were not so, we would have a naive political essay rather than a novel that is full of life. Nevertheless, the novel has been criticized as politically inaccurate and unrealistic. But if we do lose something in this area it is perhaps because James's conception of the period is as much mythic as it is historical, and what we sacrifice in political subtlety we make up in mythic texture that seems to distill the underlying political reality. In this way James deepens and broadens his material, and we can apply his perceptions not only to nineteenth-century Europe but to the nature of political man in general. And because James always works through the consciousness of his characters, Hyacinth Robinson's tragedy has both local and universal application.
There is a good deal of evidence that *The Princess Casamassima* is largely conceived in mythic terms. Clearly, James bases some of his characters on mythic archetypes. In the make-up of Hyacinth Robinson, for example, we can find a number of elements that derive from the mythic hero. Most obvious is the fact that the circumstances surrounding his birth are strange and somewhat mysterious. His mother is a poor Frenchwoman, his father probably a British Lord. Raglan suggests that the hero "is also reputed to be the son of a god." We can assume, I think, that James has here fused divinity and aristocracy; if we read the novel mytho-politically, Raglan's suggestion holds true. Like a number of mythic heroes, Hyacinth is deprived of his birthright; whatever privilege could have been his is rendered impossible, of course, when Lord Frederick is murdered by Florentine. And, in keeping with the biography of the hero, Hyacinth is raised by a foster parent, Miss Pynsent. Here, too, James substitutes political geography for mythic geography: while the mythic hero is often raised in a far-off land, Hyacinth is reared in a tenement instead of the castle that might have been his home. An almost universal feature of the hero's story—true, for example, of Oedipus, Theseus, Perseus, Jason, Dionysus, and Arthur—is the absence of information concerning his youth. This gap appears in Hyacinth's story as well; except for his visit with Miss Pynsent to the dying Florentine, we know nothing of Hyacinth's early life. Even
his name—"Hyacinth Robinson"—is mythically suggestive be­
cause it is androgynous6 (and James describes Hyacinth as
"childishly slight"7 and somewhat pretty and delicate) and
thus subtly recalls the hermaphroditic figures of certain
myths; Dionysus, for example, is sometimes described as a
"feminine" god.8 This last point may sound strange but it is
not surprising if we remember that because the hero repre­
sents the potential of generating new life by restoring the
unity of the world, his embodiment of both male and female
principles is appropriate.9

The title of James's novel suggests that Hyacinth Robin­
son shares center stage with the Princess. And if we are
looking at the mythic dimension of James's novel, this is
only fitting, for as Joseph Campbell notes: "The ultimate
adventure...is commonly represented as a mystical marriage...
of the triumphant hero-soul with the Queen Goddess of the
World. This is the crisis at the nadir, the zenith, or at
the uttermost edge of the earth, at the central point of the
cosmos, in the tabernacle of the temple, or within the dark­
ness of the deepest chamber of the heart."10 The encounter
with woman—either goddess or princess—is at the symbolic
center of the hero's story, and presages his success and
transcendence, or his failure and death. James's Princess
Casamassima is perfectly cast to play this central role. To
begin with, she is a princess— and an extraordinary one at
that. Captain Sholto describes her to Hyacinth in this way:
"Honestly, my dear boy, she's perhaps the most remarkable woman in Europe" (PC, p. 143). Campbell describes the archetype in this way:

She is the paragon of all paragons of beauty, the reply to all desire, the bliss-bestowing goal of every hero's earthly and unearthly quest....Whatever in the world has lured, whatever has seemed to promise joy, has been premonitory of her existence—in the deep of sleep, if not in the cities and forests of the world. For she is the incarnation of the promise of perfection...

And this is how the Princess appears to Hyacinth at their first meeting:

He looked at the play, but was far from seeing it; he had no sense of anything but the woman who sat there, close to him, on his right, with a fragrance in her garments and a light about her which he seemed to see even while his head was averted. The vision had been only of a moment, but it hung before him, threw a vague white mist over the proceedings on the stage....She might well be a princess—it was impossible to conform more to the finest evocations of that romantic word. She was fair, shining, slender, with an effortless majesty. Her beauty had an air of perfection; it astonished and lifted one up, the sight of it seemed a privilege, or reward....Her dark eyes, blue or grey, something that was not brown, were as kind as they were splendid, and there was an extraordinary light nobleness in the way she held her head. That head, where two or three diamond stars glittered in the thick, delicate hair which defined its shape, suggested to Hyacinth something antique and celebrated, something he had admired of old—the memory was vague—in a statue, in a picture, in a museum. Purity of line and form, of cheek and chin and lip and brow, a colour that seemed to live and glow, a radiance of grace and eminence and success—these things were seated and in triumph in the face of the Princess, and her visitor, as he held himself in his chair trembling with the revelation,
questioned if she were really of the same substance with the humanity he had hitherto known. (PC, pp. 147-48)

In the mythic drama woman is life itself. She symbolizes "the totality of what can be known," while the hero is he "who comes to know." The Princess' physical perfection surely suggests the embodiment of "that which can be known." But physical perfection is only the outward form of something more profound that the Princess comes to represent to Hyacinth—the promise of a broader, deeper, finer experience, and of an imagination that has been opened to what James, in his Preface, calls "the beauty of the world" (PC, p. 16). This is suggested, for example, by Hyacinth's mental intoxication in the Princess' drawing room. He thrills to the sumptuous splendors before him—to the furniture and the bibelots—and James tells us that he "inhaled the air that seemed to him inexpressibly delicate and sweet" (PC, p. 196). A bit later, when he visits the Princess at her country estate, Hyacinth's imaginative response is wider and more intense. The contrast between the sordid poverty that he has known and the dignity and "serenity of success" that he senses in Medley's stone walls brings tears to his eyes. James describes his visit in this way:

The cup of an exquisite experience—a week in that enchanted palace, a week of such immunity from Lomax Place and old Crook as he had never
dreamed of—was at his lips; it was purple with the wine of romance, of reality, of civilization, and he couldn't push it aside without drinking. (PC, p. 271)

But if the goddess of myth appears as the promise of knowledge that would deify, she also appears as all-devouring, "the death of everything that dies." She appears as Diana, who, having turned Actaeon into a stag, watches as his hounds tear his body apart. The dual nature of the goddess must have fascinated James, for to the very end we cannot read the character of the Princess Casamassima with certainty. What are her motives in taking up the cause of the revolutionaries? Is she sincere and dedicated, as she often claims? Or is she merely bored? In his Preface James calls her "world-weary," needing "to feel freshly about something or other— it might scarce matter what" (PC, p. 18). She is deep in revolutionary politics— she has sold most of her possessions and has communicated with Hoffendahl; yet we are told repeatedly by those closest to her, her husband and Madame Grandoni, that the Princess is given to whim and caprice. At times it is impossible to question the sincerity of her involvement, and at other times, as at Madeira Crescent, she seems disconcertingly proud of her self-imposed austerity as a member of the lower classes. But this is precisely the kind of ambiguity we might expect in the mythic goddess' relationship to the hero. The Princess' beauty promises and inspires, but it also evidently mesmerizes and
destroys. What else can we make of Captain Sholto, who does the Princess' bidding and hopes against hope that she will turn her attention his way? Men--the Prince, Captain Sholto, and, at the end, Hyacinth Robinson--are entranced by her beauty, but are also, in one way or another, destroyed by it.

There are minor characters in The Princess Casamassima who also play "mythic" roles. I've already mentioned, for example, Hyacinth's foster parent, Miss Pynsent. Very often the life of the infant or child hero is threatened--one may think of Oedipus, Jason, or Zagreus, or of biblical figures such as Joseph, Moses, and Jesus--and he is miraculously saved. While no direct threat is made on Hyacinth's life, his survival is surely in doubt--he is, after all, the bastard son of a dead Lord and an incarcerated murderess--until the frail and generous Pinnie agrees to raise him. Not only does this stranger raise him, but, for better or for worse, she keeps alive the notion of Hyacinth's birthright and the possibility that he will someday be reconciled with his "relations." But Hyacinth has another protector and guide, the hardened but also gentle Anastasius Vetch, who perhaps corresponds to the "Wise Old Man" of many legends and fairy tales. It is to Mr. Vetch that Pinnie comes for advice when, at the beginning of the novel, she must decide whether to take Hyacinth to visit the dying Florentine. Later Hyacinth comes to Mr. Vetch to borrow money and to
secure theater tickets for his date with Millicent, and this of course proves critical because it is at the theater that Hyacinth meets the Princess. Moreover, Mr. Vetch's generosity and his management of Pinnie's finances provide Hyacinth with the opportunity, after Pinnie's death, to visit the Continent—a trip that deepens and profoundly alters Hyacinth's sense of life. And late in the novel, apprehensive over Hyacinth's political entanglement, Mr. Vetch asks the Princess to intercede on Hyacinth's behalf. But by this time the danger to Hyacinth is not merely political, but a function of the complexity and ambiguity of the world itself. Thus, although Mr. Vetch is comforted by Hyacinth's promise not to "do anything" for the revolution, he little realizes the tragic irony of the remark.

James's use of mythic characters in a novel whose plot centers on the idea of political revolution is perfectly consistent. For James's insight is as obvious as it is profound: the story of the mythic hero whose task is the restoration of health to an ailing kingdom is not only of natural and theological significance, but of political significance as well. Although the origins of the hero's story may lie in the ritual murder of a vegetation god, this theme can be readily translated into the language of political violence. The old god—we may read king—is sick, and the condition of the land and the people reflects this decay; thus we are prepared for sweeping changes—for cosmic
revolution and for the restoration of health. In *Oedipus the King* Sophocles clearly draws the line that connects myth and politics. On the first page of the tragedy we learn that Thebes is plagued—that its land and people are blighted. The regeneration of Thebes is, of course, directly tied to the fall of its king. (He is the same king, who, earlier, had saved the city from the Sphinx: Sophocles understands the cyclical nature of revolution.) In the charged political atmosphere of nineteenth-century Europe, mythic image and biblical prophecy sometimes translate as historical analysis and political rhetoric. If the New Testament points to an end of human suffering, so too, in its way, does Marxist history, and the "meek" of the Bible could easily be converted into the proletariat, who would, as well, inherit the earth. It is little wonder then that James seems to conceive of revolutionary force not only in specific, local terms but also in broader, mythic terms. The scope of James's revolution is international; it is not only this or that government that is threatened, but the entirety of European civilization. Lionel Trilling describes *The Princess Casamassima* as "a novel which has at its very center the assumption that Europe has reached the full of its ripeness and is passing over into rottenness." The dissolution of a civilization—of its political and social arrangement, its culture and values—is a monumental theme; its dimensions are
implicitly universal and mythic, and James often treats it as such. Europe is a social and political Waste Land. Its jaded nobility seek excitement, as the Princess does doubt does, or, like the Prince, desperately cling to old-world traditions and to the conviction that human inequality is a truth upon which the world is founded. Meanwhile, like the citizens of Sophocles' Thebes, the swelling masses of industrial towns must contend with the problem of physical survival: Schinkel, the German cabinet-maker, notes that fifty thousand people are starving at the Docks. As I've already suggested, this kind of division is apparent in the novel in a number of ways: in the contrast between the light and grace of the upper orders and the subterranean darkness of political conspiracy; in the contrast between the fairy-gardens of country estates and the working-class tenements of London; and in the contrast between the Apollonian world of art and form and the Dionysiac energy of revolution and destruction. James seizes upon the perfect symbol for his time, for in the programless violence of the Anarchists he suggests the political equivalent of the frenzied dismemberment of the old god—the return to primordial political and social chaos. And perhaps, too, like a new god, the mysterious and invisible Hoffendahl waits to surface and shape the world anew.
This kind of analysis helps explain the restless energy that we sometimes sense in the novel, for as Lionel Trilling suggests, James shows us European society in the final throes of its death. James concretizes this "sick vitality" in some of his characters. We can see it, for example, in Rosy Muniment, whose animated and somewhat magical imagination contrasts with her obvious physical limitations. In her mind she travels everywhere, but in reality she remains bedridden throughout the novel. We can also see this combination in Lady Aurora, a spirited but awkward angel out of place among the aristocracy and poor alike. Clearly we can see it in Millicent Henning, who embodies the vitality of the London streets in all its beauty and gaudiness. More "alive" than any other character in the novel, Millicent nevertheless appears, at the end, as a vulgar expression of that energy. And of course we can see this restless energy in the Princess, whose desperate and passionate search for truth leads her to the illusory world of political radicalism. Thus one impression that James's novel makes is of energy in various stages of exhaustion. In the novel this can appear as physical impotence, as in Rosy Muniment, and also as the drifting, uninspired, though still charming life represented by Captain Sholto. In its more animated forms—Millicent and the Princess—it can appear as energy
prostituted or narrowed as it seeks final form in the half-truths of materialism or politics. In this way *The Princess Casamassima* is perhaps a further examination, social and political in nature, of the formless historical freedom suggested by Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*. There, in the splitting apart of mythic and historical reality, Melville suggests the philosophical dilemma of his century, as well as ours: How can we come to terms with reality in a way that is both intellectually and spiritually complete? This is the problem that emerges from the "cetology" chapters of the novel; Ishmael's knowledge is broad and deep—as well as beautiful—but it is also fragmentary and, ultimately, inconclusive. In *Ishmael* Melville suggests the freedom of historical man, the shapeless universe that he inhabits, and his condition as spiritual orphan. That is the novel's "modern" reality, while in *Ahab* Melville suggests another version of reality, one whose structure and coherence come to light in the paradox of myth and the fire of tragedy. If we can link these novels in this way, then James's novel is a further look at the directionlessness of historical man.

Given this framework it is possible to see parallels between Hyacinth and the hero of myth, not only in the features of their origins and early circumstances, as I've already indicated, but also in the events that reveal the emergence of their destinies. In his beautiful analysis of
The Princess Casamassima, Trilling suggests some of these parallels when he compares Hyacinth's story to that of the "Young Man from the Provinces," whose

situation is as chancy as that of any questing knight of medieval romance. He is confronted by situations whose meanings are dark to him, in which his choice seems always decisive. He understands everything to be a "test." Parsifal at the castle of the Fisher King is not more uncertain about the right thing to do than the Young Man from the Provinces picking his perilous way through the irrationalities of the society into which he has been transported.18

Like the hero of myth and the knight of romance, Hyacinth takes a journey into the unknown and unfamiliar. For the questing hero that journey is often marked by a series of tests, sometimes in an enchanted forest—a pattern suggestive at once of personal initiation and special providence. James translates this landscape into social and mental terms: we mark Hyacinth's progress by the widening of his social involvement and by the growing complexity and refinement of his sense of the world around him.19 Among heroes, too, it is difficult to analyze or explain the force of destiny—whether it is created by the uniqueness of their existence or whether it is shaped for them by higher powers. On that fateful night at the Sun and Moon, for example, Hyacinth's courage and dedication to the revolution are freely given—"I'm ready to do anything that will do any good; anything, anything—I don't care a damned rap" (PC, p. 244), he says.
But moments later Hyacinth seems to have conformed to the ominous shape of his destiny: "Yes, you're the lamb of sacrifice he [Hoffendahl] wants" (PC, p. 245), says Muniment. The hero and his destiny are mirrors that reflect each other, and the resulting image is magical. But this kind of ambiguity is the essence of the hero's life, and it is not surprising, then, that the same "magic" that transports Hyacinth into society also leads to his commitment to aid in its destruction.

On a deeper, symbolic level—beneath the social landscape and the events that mark Hyacinth's story—there is a more important parallel between James's hero and the hero of myth, one that perhaps explains why James draws upon myth in the first place. It is simply that the journey and trials of the mythic model symbolize the way in which the hero comes to know and understand the totality of experience. This is precisely the theme that James was so fascinated by—the mind's absorption of the density and complexity of reality. For the hero of myth that "coming into knowledge" is often symbolized by successful passage—through the belly of the whale, or through the Symplegades, for example. The successful hero absorbs the paradoxes of this world and perceives the unity within diversity—the oneness of time and eternity, male and female, chaos and creation.
In the political world of James's novel, two powerful symbols—Florentine and Lord Frederick—echo the paradoxes faced by the hero of myth. The ghosts of Florentine and Lord Frederick haunt Hyacinth with the dichotomies of social and political reality: upper class and lower class, leisure and labor, tradition and rootlessness, art and revolution, civilization and anarchy. In the fullness of his consciousness of these divisions—and of their paradoxical interrelatedness—Hyacinth is destroyed.

The preceding point suggests that as closely as we might relate Hyacinth to the mythic hero, James ultimately points us away from myth and toward tragedy. In doing so he reminds us of the contrast suggested by a number of great tragedies that ask to be read within a mythic context: that while profound understanding of the world is the sign of the mythic hero's transcendence, it is for the tragic hero the invariable sign of destruction. In a very real sense Nietzsche is right when he says that "Knowledge kills action."21 The man who has absorbed the fullness and intricacies of reality may perceive every action as a violation and every moral claim as invalid. But that man is at once wise and foolish—and perhaps mad, since these categories readily collapse. He is wise because he knows life truthfully and intimately; he is foolish because this world requires illusion. And he is often driven mad by the sheer weight of his knowledge. This is the stuff of tragedy—we see it in Lear,
Hamlet, and Oedipus, for example. And to a large extent we see it in Hyacinth Robinson as well. If this sounds like mixed company, we should remember that the association was clearly on James's mind:

Hamlet and Lear are surrounded, amid their complications, by the stupid and the blind, who minister in all sorts of ways to their recorded fate. Persons of markedly limited sense would, on such a principle as that, play a part in the career of my tormented youth; but he wouldn't be of markedly limited sense himself—he would note as many things and vibrate to as many occasions as I might venture to make him. (PC, p. 9)

Those whom Hyacinth leaves behind—the Muniments and the Princesses of this world—live in partial reality, and thus live with illusion and deception. If they are intelligent, like Muniment, they manipulate and deceive others. If they are passionate, like the Princess, they deceive themselves. The tragic hero must be greater than these, and in that greatness lies his suffering. If he is Hyacinth Robinson, he refuses to perpetuate the violence of his parents in his own generation, and, as Robert Langbaum suggests, he has the "moral integrity" to turn it on himself instead. We read The Princess Casamassima with the ambivalence that we are accustomed to when we read tragedy: we wonder at the depth of wisdom and the fullness of spirit embodied in the tragic hero, yet we also shrink from the violence and suffering that we are capable of inflicting on others and on ourselves.
By enlarging the dimensions of his novel so that it is suggestive of myth, James offers us a political and social analysis that is true in both historical and universal terms. In its universal dimension it reminds us, much as the Oresteia and Oedipus the King do, that mythic rhythm and political cycle are aspects of the same reality. The Greek tragedians knew this, and though their world moves convulsively and violently, it ultimately conforms to an order that we instinctively feel to be true and just. But while the ritual framework of The Princess Casamassima suggests the possibility that wholeness can be restored to the state, the reality of James's world argues otherwise: born of a consciousness that interprets reality narrowly and partially, the proposed violence in the novel comes to be seen as an act that would enshrine fragmentation. The end of the novel suggests that there is no room for Hyacinth Robinson, or for his insistence on the interrelatedness of life. The heir to civilization is Muniment, through whom James suggests the emergence of a political type that has become frighteningly familiar in our time: the party man, whose only ideology is the ideology of power. In Hyacinth's world politics has usurped reality. In this world we do not feel what we feel so strongly in Greek tragedy—that man's destiny is at once political, social, spiritual, and cosmic. Instead, reality has been reduced and narrowed: man's condition is political,
and can be changed—so the argument runs—politically. This reduction is reflected in both Muniment and the Princess, for whom reality has by and large become politicized. James's world thus points out to us one of the distortions that historical man is prone to. At the same time, however, the novel's mythic lens, by exploring the paradoxes of reality through the events and people in the life of the hero, invites us to look further and see that the riddle of man's existence lies deeper than his political arrangement. Reality, like the Princess, is Janus-like, and the hero, in life as in art, absorbs and accommodates its ambiguities. To Hyacinth the Princess remains the most beautiful and most remarkable woman in Europe, and this suggests that although it is misguided, her passion on behalf of "the people" represents something inviolable. On the other hand, as Hyacinth quickly perceives when he travels to Paris, the eternal grace of art and the beauty of civilization are often tainted by the smell of blood and the horrors of history.26 In the final analysis Hyacinth rejects neither Florentine nor Lord Frederick, and thus remains committed to the loftiest conception of society, that in which grandeur and equality coexist. Hyacinth's death suggests a tragic loss of balance in the polarized world of James's novel. Nearly a century later, it speaks even more forcefully to us.
FOOTNOTES


2 John Kimmey, "The Princess Casamassima and the Quality of Bewilderment," Nineteenth-Century Fiction, 22 (June 1967), 55, notes this division, and also suggests that it reflects "the split in Hyacinth's social consciousness as well as the conflict of personal loyalties in his conscience."


5 Lord Raglan, pp. 175-83.

6 James M. Cox, "Henry James: The Politics of Internationalism," The Southern Review, 8 (July 1972), 500, also suggests that Hyacinth's "dedication to the Cause leads him toward the masculinity of Paul Muniment," while "the passion for beauty and art leads him toward the Princess Casamassima."


10 Joseph Campbell, p. 109.

11 Joseph Campbell, pp. 110-11.


13 Joseph Campbell, p. 114.

14 Joseph Campbell, p. 112.

15 Joseph Campbell, p. 9.


17 Lionel Trilling, p. 61.
18 Lionel Trilling, p. 63.

19 This is consistent with James's discussion of character and story in his Preface to *The Princess Casamassima*: "...I confess I never see the leading interest of any human hazard but in a consciousness (on the part of the moved and moving creature) subject to fine intensification and wide enlargement."

20 Joseph Campbell, pp. 170-71.


22 Robert Langbaum, "Thoughts for Our Time: Three Novels on Anarchism," *The American Scholar*, 42 (Spring 1973), 250: "These novels [The Secret Agent, The Princess Casamassima, and The Possessed] can lead to political understanding and even to right political action by demonstrating the limits of politics. They suggest that radicals must not try to politicize the other realms of value but must operate politically with the other realms in mind—if they are not to lose in the fervor of action and the rigidities of ideology their original aims born in those other realms..."

23 Lionel Trilling, pp. 91-92. Trilling says this of the Princess: "She is, in short, the very embodiment of the modern will which masks itself in virtue, making itself appear harmless, the will that hates itself and finds its manifestations guilty and is able to exist only if it operates in the name of virtue, that despises the variety and modulations of the human story and longs for an absolute humanity, which is but another way of saying a nothingness."

24 Langbaum, p. 235.

25 In his discussion of *The Princess Casamassima*, *The Secret Agent*, and *The Possessed*, Langbaum, p. 250, suggests this possibility: "The lesson for the radical intellectuals is that politics cannot subsume the whole world..."

26 Lionel Trilling, pp. 83-86, also makes this point, and suggests, too, that Hyacinth's tragedy—as well as his
nobility—lies in part in his recognition of his own guilt in coming to terms with art and civilization.
THE TRIAL: MYTH AND TRAGEDY DISTORTED

The story of The Trial—somewhat like the story of Moby-Dick—comes to us in two ways. On the one hand the novel traces the particular arrest, protest, and execution of one Joseph K., a rather simple and unassuming banker; while on the other hand the story seems universal and parabolic, describing the plight of Everyman as he stands in judgment before cosmic law. There are few works as puzzling as The Trial—its language is smooth and simple, but its plot takes bizarre twists and turns. Is the story "real" or is it some individual or collective nightmare? Kafka never allows us to be certain because in The Trial everyday reality and surreality walk hand-in-hand and because ordinary events and the sense of suprahistorical design form a seamless weave.

Any reading of The Trial must take its ambiguity into account. Certainly we can pick apart the threads, isolate this or that, and make sense of Kafka's vision. We can, for example, focus on the political, on K.'s hauntingly prophetic fate, which chillingly prefigures the fate of so many people in Nazi Germany. The middle-of-the-night arrests, the vague, unnamed charges, the inevitability of guilt—all of these suggest very strongly that Kafka felt the drift of
his time. And the novel tells us much about our own world as well. The story of a rather common man caught in a labyrinthine and corrupt bureaucracy that inexorably grinds onward—all that we have come to term "Kafkaesque"—has proved to be an apt metaphor for the modern condition. But if we feel settled with such an account Kafka is quick to remind us, either directly or indirectly, that his story looks beyond politics, both inward to the psychological and outward to the theological as well. In this way the novel examines man in his time as well as Man in Time. It also probes and perhaps redefines the nature of innocence and guilt, both personal and collective. We and Joseph K. stand puzzled, naked before a cosmos that never explains itself but never fails to set things right.

These are some of the very issues that tragedy explores. In The Trial's "double exposure" of self and cosmos—that combination which we find, say, in the experiences of Lear, Oedipus, and Ahab—the stuff of tragedy is tantalizingly present. And in its "epiphany of law" the novel resembles the movement of many tragedies. Shakespeare's tragic world, for example, often moves to rid itself of evil—of the Edmunds and Macbeths and Iagos—and generally does so at a terrific cost. Blood begets blood until both innocent and wicked lie dead and the world is exhausted but once again stable. We might trace a similar pattern in the Oresteia.
It is not surprising, therefore, that The Trial often appears in discussions of tragedy in general and of modern tragedy in particular.

But although there are obvious echoes of the tragic world in The Trial, on what grounds can we really discuss it as tragedy, and in what significant ways does it speak to us? For surely Joseph K. stands apart from those characters who arouse "pity and fear" and on whom so much depends. Can we look for tragedy in the rock pit to which Joseph K. is escorted to be killed "like a dog"? Or in the musty tenements of Kafka's Prague? And how can we talk of tragic action when the events of the novel come to us in such cloudy, fragmented fashion, and when the reason for those events (K.'s "crime") is never given? In addition, we often speak of "tragic awareness" as a salient feature of tragic heroes—of that painful look into the nature of man and into the way of the world that is both blinding (sometimes literally) and illuminating. But even if we grant the "instinctive understanding" of guilt that some critics have observed in Joseph K. 5—the way in which he is magnetically drawn to the law courts, for example—surely this is not the kind of awareness we generally consider tragic.

Nevertheless, an examination of the plot and method of The Trial will show, I think, that Kafka is working in a tragic mode. It will also show that The Trial transforms
the apparatus and vision of tragedy and in so doing produces a portrait of modern tragic man, similar in some ways but also very different from tragic heroes of the past. The transformation is in Kafka's shaping of the mythic elements in his novel--such as the quest motif--so that they impress upon the texture of the story in strange new ways. And the method that Kafka uses to effect that transformation is what I would call the "dream-style." The result is a story which, like Eliot's The Waste Land, shows us that the tragedy of modern man is in some ways a reflection of and inextricably bound to the distortions of his mythic world.

Before we look at the function of Kafka's "dream-style" it would be wise to simply illustrate its operation. And although the reasons why Kafka uses such a style are not obvious, its presence is unmistakable throughout the novel. The "dream-style" is characterized, in general, by an objective, straightforward narration of events that seem to be--but are not--taking place in a dream. Put another way, what surprises us about many events in The Trial is the fact that they are really happening. Our natural reaction is to question their objective reality, but the "dream-style" turns the extraordinary into the everyday. Take, for example, Kafka's account of the way in which K. comes upon the place where his first interrogation is to be held. Somewhat surprised and puzzled when he realizes that the Court of Inquiry
is in a Juliusstrasse tenement, and unwilling to ask directly for the location of the court, K. decides to knock at various doors and inquire about a joiner named Lanz (he simply invents the man) so that he can get a look at the rooms and perhaps thus find the law court. After several failures, K. finds himself on the fifth story. He knocks at the first door he comes to:

The first thing he saw in the little room was a great pendulum clock which already pointed to ten. "Does a joiner called Lanz live here?" he asked. "Please go through," said a young woman with sparkling eyes, who was washing children's clothes in a tub, and she pointed with her damp hand to the open door of the next room.

K. felt as though he were entering a meeting-hall. A crowd of the most variegated people—nobody troubled about the newcomer—filled a medium-sized two-windowed room, which just below the roof was surrounded by a gallery, also quite packed, where the people were able to stand only in a bent posture with their heads and backs knocking against the ceiling. K., feeling the air too thick for him, stepped out again and said to the young woman, who seemed to have misunderstood him: "I asked for a joiner, a man called Lanz." "I know," said the woman, "just go right in." K. might not have obeyed if she had not come up to him, grasped the handle of the door, and said: "I must shut this door after you, nobody else must come in." "Very sensible," said K., "but the room is surely too full already." However, he went in again.

This passage contains elements that might be considered dreamlike. The invented name "Lanz," for example, becomes K.'s magical password. Again, the significance of information is somewhat leveled-out, so that our observation of this scene cannot be as selective as it would normally be: the
gallery and the "variegated people" that K. sees are not really much more important—though they should be—than the tub of children's clothes and the young woman's sparkling eyes and damp hand. As in many dreams, space is subject to distortion: the whole scene is crowded and cramped, the ceiling of the room too low to accommodate the men in the gallery, who stand hunched. And, as in many dreams, one particular utterance seems inexplicably significant. It is the kind of utterance to which a dreamer, reporting his dream, might instinctively attach importance, though he might be unable to explain just why he does so: "I must shut this door after you, nobody else must come in." Indeed, one would be struck, I think, by the similarity between this passage and many passages in which Freud recounts the dreams of his patients. But although there is much in this passage that seems out of joint, Kafka's overall style insists on its objective reality.

There are many other scenes in The Trial that illustrate the operation of Kafka's "dream-style." Often the people we meet or speak to in everyday life make their reappearance in our dreams, sometimes for no apparent reason. We hear a voice from the recent past, or a familiar face appears suddenly and then vanishes. Kafka suggests this phenomenon when K., hurrying to the Court of Inquiry, catches sight of the three bank clerks who had been present at his arrest:
Strangely enough, though he had little time to study passers-by, he caught sight of the three clerks already involved in his case: Rabensteiner, Kullich, and Kaminer. The first two were journeying in a streetcar which crossed in front of him, but Kaminer was sitting on the terrace of a café and bent inquisitively over the railing just as K. passed. (The Trial, p. 42)

The inanimate can reappear in dreams as readily as the animate: when K. visits the painter Titorelli, he notices an unfinished portrait of a judge which "strikingly resembled the portrait hanging in the lawyer's office" (The Trial, p. 182). The sudden appearance, in dreams, of people who seem to come out of nowhere is captured when K. and his uncle visit the lawyer. K. is astonished to learn that there is a fourth person at this meeting:

"...there's a dear friend of mine visiting me at this very moment," and he [the lawyer] waved a hand toward a dark corner of the room. "Where?" asked K., almost rudely, in his first shock of astonishment. He looked round uncertainly; the light of the small candle did not nearly reach the opposite wall. And then some form or other in the dark corner actually began to stir. By the light of the candle, which his uncle now held high above his head, K. could see an elderly gentleman sitting there at a little table. He must have been sitting without even drawing breath, to have remained for so long unnoticed. (The Trial, pp. 129-30)

Of course, there are even more obvious examples of "dream-style" in The Trial. The entire "whipper" episode suggests the eerie, surreal landscape of dreams, as do Block's groveling before the lawyer and the "cathedral" section
(how does the priest know K.'s name?) But again in these passages--as throughout the novel--the objective reality of events cannot be disproven. As Wilhelm Emrich points out, one is reminded in this connection of the opening scene of *The Metamorphosis*, where, having told us that Gregor Samsa awoke one day to find that he had been turned into a hideous insect, Kafka tells us quite clearly that "it was no dream."

There are, I think, several reasons why Kafka tells his story the way he does, and these suggest that the style of *The Trial* is very well suited to its matter. Furthermore, the "dream-style" bears directly on our conception of the work as tragedy.

One effect of Kafka's style is that reality is rendered in a manner significantly different from what we might call realistic or representational. Whatever assessment we make of K. or of his relationship to the plot or to the setting must be made as we reorient ourselves to the world that Kafka draws. For in *The Trial* traditional points of view are abandoned for new perspectives, much as Picasso altered pictorial perspective in *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* and Schoenberg modified tonality in his music. One point suggested by *The Trial*--and in this it is like a good deal of modern art--is that the distortions with which modern man lives make representationalism in art obsolete and invalid. A true "mirroring" of reality, the novel seems to say, will not be photographic but rather fragmented, perhaps incoherent,
bent into new perspectives. Picasso's Guernica is "real" because its distortions show us the horror of modern war—a horror that perhaps could not have been captured in traditional composition.

Closely related to this new sense of reality is the sense of the irrational that is suggested by the "dream-style." The strangeness of the arrest, the musty, twisting corridors, doors that mysteriously open onto omnipresent courtrooms, and the incredible and bizarre hierarchy of the Law Courts all suggest a world that lives in nightmare. In The Trial "this cannot be" is turned inside-out to read "this must be." Of course, the sense of the irrational has been a significant dimension in art for a long time. The Romantics often explored the underside of consciousness. About a hundred years before The Trial, De Quincey probed the nature of tormented hallucination in his Confessions of an English Opium Eater. Yet there is something different about the irrational in The Trial, as it is different in a number of twentieth-century works. Kafka's handling of material leaves us with the uneasy feeling that the irrational has become permanently fixed in everyday affairs. It is no longer a vehicle for personal or symbolic vision only; it has become public.

The "dream-style" also affects the way in which we perceive the relationship between K. and the action of the novel. A dream will sweep the dreamer along with its own twisting,
turning logic: the dreamer is not so much actor as he is acted upon. So too in *The Trial*: there is a drifting sensation in the novel, a sense that K. is unable to control the events of his life. The shape of the action is closed and already implied by the mood of the opening arrest. The further we read into *The Trial* the greater our impression that K. is instinctively fulfilling the unalterable design of his destiny.

More important, I think, is Kafka's use of the "dream-style" to create a mythic structure that is nightmarishly distorted and which, therefore—because myth always reveals to us those things that are fundamental to our existence—suggests the tragic lot of modern man. Dream and myth have always been linked. John Priest, for example, suggests that they share a "middle ground" between heaven and earth, god and man, the sacred and the profane. In the Bible, he points out, dreams, like myth, often reveal the relationship between god's plan and earthly affairs. As such they offer a symbolic picture of "true" reality, the interpretation of which provides us with a meaningful world view—the physical and spiritual design of the cosmos. This is precisely the significance of myth, which unfolds to us the eternal dimensions of our everyday lives. Even in our own time, when much of the mythic architecture of the world has been leveled, the connection between myth and dream has been reforged in the Collective Unconscious of Jung's psychology. And even
if we opt for a Freudian reading of dreams, their symbolic and magical import persists, but of course with a twist: instead of bringing us into collective relationship with the transhistorical, dreams bring us into relationship with ourselves—they are the symbolic keys that unlock our true (individual) natures. One might say, too, at this point, that one reason why Kafka uses the "dream-style" to tell us his story, as opposed to an actual dream, is that a dream might overpersonalize what Kafka apparently intends to be an experience that is also public and collective. This is supported, I think, by our sense of Joseph K. as both individual and Everyman.

Kafka's "dream-style" thus orients the drama of his bank clerk so that it is informed by mythic, universal motifs. I have already mentioned one in passing—the quest motif, which of course involves a series of "trials" and also suggests the possibility of rebirth and regeneration through suffering. Another motif that is clearly linked to K.'s fortune is that of the sacrificial victim or scapegoat. And in the time-span of the novel—it begins on K.'s thirtieth birthday and ends the evening before his thirty-first—there is perhaps a suggestion of the annual ritual of the year Daemon. Now these are some of the archetypal patterns whose presence is felt in tragedy. That is not to say, of course, that myth and tragedy are one and the same—far from it. Nevertheless, it does suggest that tragedy, like myth, probes the heart and mystery
of human existence, and that its vision is often conceived in images and patterns that are similar to those found in myth. Oedipus is not the Corn God, but a human being. Nevertheless, his undoing and suffering are obviously tied to the regeneration of a barren Thebes. The physical or spiritual torment of tragic figures like Pentheus, Lear, Hippolytus, and Hamlet recall the pathos of seasonal rituals, the sacrificial deaths of Adonis, Attis, and Dionysus. And if it is the nature of tragedy to separate us from the resurrection or apotheosis that follows the mythic sacrifice, that moment when man, god, and nature are one in joy, we can little doubt that the fate of the tragic hero heightens and intensifies our understanding of life and points the way to moral, spiritual, and political regeneration, because the final vision of tragedy is often the restoration of cosmic balance.

When we turn to The Trial, Kafka's transformation of mythic apparatus is readily apparent. Although archetypal patterns are present, they are so in faded outline: we can perceive their forms, but their significance has been weakened and obscured. The cosmic resonance of the heroic quest, for example, becomes muted and confused as K. wanders through the labyrinth of court proceedings. The obstacles and tests that point the way to the hero's destiny become in The Trial the hearings, interrogations, and consultations that seem to point nowhere. In general, the mythic drama, which unfolds
to touch man and heaven, becomes in The Trial a grotesque jumble. When the mythic hero dies, man and cosmos are reconciled. When the great tragic hero dies, we look with agony and somehow with affirmation at the universal in man. But when K. dies all we know is that a man has been executed for some reason that has been mysteriously withheld.

In its "double vision" of myth and contemporary reality The Trial is perhaps a spiritual descendant of both Moby-Dick and The Princess Casamassima. Where Melville explores the splitting apart of myth and history and the ambiguous freedom of modern man, and where James examines the political ramifications of historical energy that has become shapeless, restless, and discontinuous with its mythic context, Kafka describes a world in which the distortions of myth alter the very substance of reality, making it dreamlike and perverse. The "double vision" of The Trial is particularly evident. On the surface the novel graphically describes the fragmented, directionless world of modern bourgeois man, drifting through a life that he cannot understand. It has been suggested that Kafka's work reflects a reality that "shadows forth only the phantasmagoria of the meaningless, and that it "knows no physical or moral order." In one sense these observations are obviously applicable to The Trial. Yet in another sense the reality of The Trial is sure, ordered, and final--no less so than in Oedipus the King. This aspect of reality is
suggestive of myth and ritual and is symbolized by the workings of the hierarchical and ineluctable court. That we feel it to be a corruption and a perversion is a function of Kafka's analysis of modern existence, for in The Trial the deformation of ritual form suggests the aberrant reality of our world. If the rhythm of sacrifice can unfold to reveal the rightness of cosmic justice—as it seems to in Oedipus the King and Hamlet—in Kafka's nightmare it seems to twist into murder. In our world ritual mystery and ritual symbol have ossified into ritual slaughter. In a sense, James, working politically, and Kafka, working metaphysically, arrive at the same point: both reveal the potential terror of a world in which myth degenerates into power, and in which power is glorified into myth. In our time Orwell would describe the victory of such madness in 1984.

What Kafka offers us in The Trial is thus a vision of myth in decay. Those images that are the life-blood of a culture are shown to be life-denying and themselves moribund. And because mythic consciousness is the bond of civilization, imparting to it a sense of wholeness and meaning, its corruption in The Trial helps explain the isolation, fragmentation, and directionlessness that we so strongly feel in the novel. Relationships between men and women are empty and mechanical, people wander the halls of the courts aimlessly or grovel before their lawyers. We are apt to agree with K.'s assessment of the way of the world: lying has
become "a universal principle." Nor should we be surprised that Kafka makes use of myth to explore his world. So too do Eliot and Joyce in works that are certainly among the age's most important, The Waste Land and Ulysses. Myth informs the vision of history, too, in the work of Spengler. A number of writers of the early twentieth century were instinctively drawn to myth for a variety of reasons. Some contrast the glory of the past with the triviality and hollowness of the world around them. Others, perhaps more positive, look for continuity in change—for mythic meaning in a world that seems in disarray. Still others invent their own mythic structures. In The Trial Kafka reveals to us the tragedy of a world in which the distortions of myth reflect our own confusion, alienation, and death. And what better symbol could Kafka choose than the Law Court? In Greek tragedy the face of the law ultimately comes into focus, and in that face, through our suffering, we see an image of truth and divine justice. But in The Trial the courts are musty and the face of the law remains unseen: truth has become as slippery and as oppressive as lies, and divine justice has turned into murder.

The tragic world creates and is in turn created by character. Given the transformation of the mythic dimension in The Trial, therefore, it is not surprising that the hero is similar to but also very different from tragic heroes of
the past. Like many tragic characters, K. is the central figure in a drama of crime and punishment ("crime" here is not necessarily a legal term: a tragic character's crime might be excess—even of virtue—or simply an inability to recognize reality). Tragedies often explore a character's disruption of nature's balance—Hegel calls it "the harmony of substantive being in its ethical character"—and the way in which the universe moves, often convulsively, to restore that balance. K.'s crime (if there is a crime it is, after all, a capital offense) and punishment conform to this fundamental tragic pattern. We often speak, too, of the inevitability of the tragic hero's fate. As Frye puts it, "tragedy presents the...theme of narrowing a comparatively free life into a process of causation." This is certainly true of K.: his acceptance of the logic of the court seals his fate. But K.'s resemblance to other tragic characters is most striking in his all-too-human condition. Like Oedipus and Hamlet, K. reveals to us that tragedy inheres in man's lot—that it has as much to do with what a man is as with what he does. K. realizes this when it occurs to him that in order to answer the unspecified charges brought against him, "the whole of one's life would have to be recalled to mind, down to the smallest actions and accidents, clearly formulated and examined from every angle" (The Trial, p. 161).
But certainly K. also differs considerably from his tragic predecessors. I have already mentioned the drifting sensation that is suggested by the "dream-style," the way in which K. seems pulled along by the current of his case. This point bears directly on the nature of tragic character and tragic action, for we are accustomed to tragic heroes who undo themselves as a result of action and purpose to which they are fully and consciously committed. The contrast between K. and these tragic heroes suggests one aspect of Kafka's transformation of the tragic vision. Certainly it is true that K. seems to have rejected what Titorelli describes as "ostensible acquittal" and "postponement"—those strategies which consume the defendant but which keep him alive by keeping his case from ever being settled—and has forced his case to its end. But although this is a more tragic posture (we know of no others whose cases are settled) it seems more a function of K.'s instinct, of that magnetic attraction that exists between K. and the law, than an indication of tragic defiance. (Indeed, Kafka leaves it to his reader to conclude that K. has chosen to pursue his case. All we are told is that two men come to lead K. to his death—and that K. is waiting for them.) As I suggested earlier, K. seems to drift instinctively toward his destined end. In this connection it is worth noting that Kafka seems to alter the delicate balance between free will and fate that seems to operate in many tragedies. One question that often arises
in discussions of *Oedipus the King*, *Hamlet*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, is whether their central characters are acting freely or merely playing out their predetermined fates. And one valid response, I think, is that the great tragic heroes help shape the destinies that govern them, or, to put it another way, that the sense of inevitability in tragedy arises because the line of action passes through those critical and mysterious points at which free will and necessity converge and become indistinguishable. The victims of traditional tragedies are thus also heroes because of the magnitude of their decisions and purpose. But in *The Trial* Kafka alters the balance between freedom and fate, hero and victim. Our sense of K.'s fate is not that it is created by him, but that it is imposed on him and rather instinctively fulfilled. K. is thus far more victim than he is hero.

Related to this entire matter is another element that suggests Kafka's transformation of tragic character, K.'s relative lack of awareness. Many tragic characters are intensely conscious of their situations; we might even call them "superconscious." The soliloquies of Hamlet and Macbeth, for example, suggest the intensity of their introspection. Often awareness is a product of suffering, as it is for Oedipus and Lear (for these, paradoxically, clarity comes with the onset of physical blindness). But neither during nor at the end of his life do we feel that K. possesses that intensity of vision. Indeed, the nature of reality remains
uncertain to the very end:

His glance fell on the top story of the house adjoining the quarry. With a flicker as of a light going up, the casements of a window there suddenly flew open; a human figure, faint and insubstantial at that distance and that height, leaned abruptly far forward and stretched both arms still farther. Who was it? A friend? A good man? Someone who sympathized? Someone who wanted to help? Was it one person only? Or was it mankind? Was help at hand? Were there arguments in his favor that had been overlooked? Of course there must be. Logic is doubtless unshakable, but it cannot withstand a man who wants to go on living. Where was the Judge whom he had never seen? Where was the High Court, to which he had never penetrated? He raised his hands and spread out all his fingers.

But the hands of one of the partners were already at K.'s throat, while the other thrust the knife deep into his heart and turned it there twice. With failing eyes K. could still see the two of them immediately before him, cheek leaning against cheek, watching the final act. "Like a dog!" he said; it was as if the shame of it must outlive him. (The Trial, pp. 285-86)

K.'s inability to understand the meaning of events is a reflection of reality's failure to cohere meaningfully. This is suggested, I think, by the distortions of the mythic elements in the novel. When myth collapses, direction and meaning become ambiguous and moral order becomes unrecognizable to the individual will. This situation makes the nature of action and the notion of tragic awareness problematical. We, as well as characters themselves (Macbeth, for example), can measure and evaluate action when it is taken against a background of recognizable political or cosmic order. But this is not the case in The Trial.
A final point concerning K. as a tragic character has to do with the matter of "stature." The traditional tragic hero, though he is set apart from the rest of society by the nature of his fate, is also typically the center of that society. When we watch tragedy we often feel that the earth shakes, and this impact is no doubt a function of momentous events that crystallize in the life of the tragic hero. For a variety of reasons, some of which I have already touched upon here, more recent versions of tragedy look to the average man, to members of the middle and lower classes, and to people who live at the moral and spiritual edges of life. But this is simply to say, perhaps, that the tragic vision is plastic and that it redefines itself to meet the conditions of its time. One important point that this modern tragedy makes is precisely that K. is ordinary—he is no more guilty or innocent than anyone else, on either side of the law. He is in fact a man who for better or worse is very much in tune with his time. Yet it is in that very ordinariness, Kafka seems to suggest, that we can best understand the idea of tragedy.

Tragedies often end on a note of reconciliation. We sense that law and balance have been reasserted, and that free will and destiny, individual and community, self and cosmos, though often in strife, are somehow also parts of a larger structure in which they join. That is a vision central, for example, to a number of ancient Greek tragedies.
In *The Trial* the execution of Joseph K. also marks the re-
assertion of law, but how different our sense of his end is. 
This is so because *The Trial* moves along ancient lines even 
as it reveals the inverted reality of our world. For if the 
unfolding of ritual affirms the mysterious wholeness of the 
world, and its implicit meaningfulness in terror, in *The 
Trial* it also points out the distortions of our world. Thus 
the novel very powerfully evokes two versions of reality, one 
whole, the other tortured. One version suggests the ultimate 
coherence and closure of the universe, while the other 
graphically reveals to us the discontinuity of legal and 
moral order and the nightmarish tragedy that is our exist-
ence. And in this way *The Trial* also suggests to us that a 
redefinition of tragedy is the same thing as a redefinition 
of man.
FOOTNOTES


3 Thorlby, p. 55, argues otherwise: "...The Trial cannot be read as even a symbolic account of totalitarian persecution, simply because the whole of the uncanny train of events narrated here are responded to by the hero in a manner that makes no political sense."


5 Krieger, pp. 117-27; Wilhelm Emrich, Franz Kafka: A Critical Study of his Writings, tr. Sheema Zeben Buehne (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1968), p. 316, argues that "it is Joseph K. himself who has unknowingly brought about his arrest"; Joan Mellen, "Joseph K. and the Law," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 12 (Summer 1970), 295-302, suggests that in The Trial Kafka distinguishes between bourgeois law and a higher "Law" or "moral imperative"—"that all men accept each other as equals regardless of social rank or position"—and argues that "Joseph K. is guilty, but not of violating any laws the Courts would uphold; these, the norms of bourgeois society, he has always scrupulously obeyed. Rather, he is guilty of violating a moral absolute, and his feelings of guilt represent his half-conscious recognition that his life has become meaningless because he has lost sight of this Law"; and Eliseo Vivas, "Kafka's Distorted Mask," in Kafka: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Ronald Gray (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 138, says this of K.:
"If he truly were convinced of his innocence he would have laughed at the whole absurd business..."

6 A number of critics have described Kafka's style in terms of dreams. Ronald Gray, *Franz Kafka* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 107, calls The Trial "a waking dream, both a real world experienced as a dream, and a dream experienced as a real world." Emrich, p. 329, notes that at the beginning of the novel Joseph K. is in a "half-dream" state; Martin Greenberg, *The Terror of Art: Kafka and Modern Literature* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1968), explores Kafka's use of dreams, and calls The Trial a "dream narrative" that "is not a unity of action but of image." Other works by Kafka have been described in similar fashion. For example, V. Murrill and W.S. Marks, III, "Kafka's 'The Judgment' and The Interpretation of Dreams," *The Germanic Review*, 48 (May 1973), 212-28, draw parallels between "The Judgment" and Freud's central work on dreams, and suggest that the story has a "dream-like unity of mood."


8 Austin Warren "Franz Kafka," in *Kafka: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 128: "In The Trial...the whole sequence is so improbable as to suggest some kind of pervasive allegory, but at no point (or almost no point) does one encounter downright impossibility."

9 Emrich, pp. 329-30.


12 Campbell, pp. 169-70.

13 Emrich, pp. 329-30, suggests that Kafka deleted from The Trial those sections that might have been read as dreams: "He would have the break-in of the universal powers pervading normal consciousness understood not as mere unreal dream visions but rather as extremely 'common confusions' and realities."


21 Northrop Frye, p. 212.

22 Ronald Gray, "Introduction," in *Kafka: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 5, disagrees: "...inevitability implies logic, cause, and effect, progression. The decline of Joseph K., though it progresses, is haphazard, sporadic, and arbitrary..." Yet perhaps that arbitrariness is a function of Kafka's presentation of material--and not a function of the court, whose workings are ultimately unyielding and sure.

23 Harry Slochower, p. 350: "The works of Kafka and Thomas Mann present the menace in the false and dead myth. But they also suggest--Kafka somewhat hesitantly, Mann more confidently--the possibility of a "breakthrough" and the reemergence of the living myth, of one human world."
Waiting for Godot: Comic Deformation and the Vision of Tragedy at the Edge of Time

Few works have captured the imagination of their time as has Waiting for Godot. The variety of critical responses to the work is evidence of its mysterious power; like Hamlet, Beckett's play seems to inspire and absorb the broadest range of interpretation. In it critics have seen despair and hope; twentieth-century existentialism and medieval allegory; vaudeville and ritual; and absurdity and theology. But like many great works Waiting for Godot seems to have an irreducible core that resists interpretation. Criticism takes us just so far, and then points to mystery.

Part of our fascination with the play is the result, no doubt, of the way in which it captures so baldly and so economically the tenor of mid-twentieth-century life. Written at a time when the two world wars seemed a mere rehearsal for civilization's final collapse, the play's theme is nothing less than the nature and meaning of existence. Yet in order to explore this theme Beckett removes the surface structures and forms of twentieth-century life. What we get, instead, is a play of eerie purity: the sun and the sky are above, and men walk the earth below. Character, plot, and setting are
simplified and distilled: two tramps wait for Godot on a road near a tree. Its primitive nature has suggested the play's closeness to dramatic origins. As Curtis M. Brooks has pointed out, Waiting for Godot seems to illustrate Frye's "auto," a form which points modern drama back to ritual. If this is true, then it helps explain the play's uncanny power to evoke archetypal rhythms and antitheses: light and dark, movement and stasis, dreams and wakefulness, life and death, salvation and damnation. Much of the play's beauty and mystery seems to result from its stark conjunction of modern mood and ancient form.

But the heart of the play—and this is suggested by the English subtitle, Tragicomedy in Two Acts—seems to lie in its mingling of comic and tragic rhythms, which, like the paired opposites just mentioned, seem to reinforce the play's ritualistic power. The relationship between these two archetypal impulses must tell us a good deal about the play in totality—about its "vision." But how might we formulate that relationship in a way that both accurately describes the total vision of the play while it also consistently explains its separate parts?—that is a problem central to the interpretation of Waiting for Godot because both comedy and tragedy appear in its fabric. I would suggest the following: that in Waiting for Godot comedy is preserved but deformed to serve the larger interests of tragedy. That is,
the deliverance implied by the comic rhythm is aborted and thus intensifies the larger tragic vision of the play.

If we examine Waiting for Godot we can see that many of its elements are genuinely comic but that these elements are also frustrated or deformed. Perhaps the most obvious illustration of this—and here we can see part of the strength of the play's primitive form—is Beckett's representation of natural cycles. Comedy is grounded in "the assurance of a recurrent salvation, of security in nature..." Our spring festivals—religious and secular—remind us of our spiritual and physical dependence on the orderliness of nature's ways. Natural cycles offer us collective security, and faith in the urge to live—the knowledge that spring always follows winter and that daylight follows the dark night of the soul. It is no accident that comedies typically end in daylight and in springtime. According to Frye, romantic comedy is

...the drama of the green world, its plot being assimilated to the ritual theme of the triumph of life and love over the waste land.

But when we turn to Waiting for Godot we can see how natural cycles are suggested, and then fail; and how, as a result, the hope and renewal implied by the rhythms of nature are undermined. In Act II spring has apparently come to Vladimir and Estragon's waste land, but it is feeble, and the world remains cold to body and spirit alike. The ritual resurrection of spring, representing the interconnectedness of man, nature,
and god, does not come to the world of Godot, and Vladimir and Estragon continue to wait. The failure of the seasonal cycle echoes what appears to be a deformation of the daily cycle. Act I begins in the evening, and by the end of the act the moon has risen in the night sky. Act II proceeds in exactly the same fashion. The cumulative effect—and this is especially so since the nature of the play suggests that this rhythm will be repeated over and over—is to suggest the natural passage of one day to the next but to eliminate those portions of the day, morning and afternoon, that are associated with comedy. Thus we are left with the disquieting sensation that although nature's wheel forever turns, only its darkest arc returns to us.

The deformation of the cycle of nature is related to the central action of the play—the wait for the mysterious Godot, whose arrival would signal the comic deliverance of Vladimir and Estragon. Frye, apparently following Nietzsche's suggestion, points out that "The action of comedy moves toward a deliverance from something which, if absurd, is by no means invariably harmless." Comedies often end with miraculous untangling: disguises are taken off, brothers are distinguished from lovers, heroes are set free from prison or seem to return from the dead. Life is sorted out and happiness prevails. If this is the result of direct action taken by the main characters, we marvel at their ingenuity; and if this is the result of apparently arbitrary intervention, we wonder
at the grace of the world. In *Waiting for Godot* the possibility of deliverance rests exclusively with Godot: his arrival will confer meaning on what appears to be a hopeless absurd situation. The entire play moves toward that promised arrival, but our hopes are dashed. Comedy is here deformed because we are eternally out of step with the promise of delivery.

If the comic spirit that is embedded in the rhythm of natural cycles is deformed in *Waiting for Godot*, so too is the comedy that draws upon the purely physical. Nietzsche describes the comic as "the artistic delivery from the nausea of the absurd." Comedy looks squarely at man's limitations and transforms them into cause for laughter and even celebration. And of course our most evident limitations are physical. Sometimes people slip and fall and sometimes they must obey the call of nature when they least want to. The quickest way to deflate pomp and circumstance is to show that we cannot escape our own bodies and the laws of nature: Macbeth cannot sneeze and kill Duncan at the same time. Walter Kerr suggests that "our most familiar comic images" are purely physical:

There is the hungry man staring at food; there is the shabbily dressed man shivering in the doorway; there is the sexually deprived man howling at the moon.
Waiting for Godot is full of physical humor, some of it rather coarse. Tattered clothing and boots that seem to rebel against feet, old carrots and turnips plucked from ragged pockets, bad breath, a jumble of bodies that have fallen over one another—these are just parts of the physical apparatus that generate so much humor in Waiting for Godot. And it is very funny, especially in performance. But ultimately the physical humor in the play is exaggerated to the point of strain, and comic anarchy gives way to tragic pain. Fozzo goes blind, and Lucky goes dumb, and death suddenly appears close at hand—in fact, a condition of life:

When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you?...They give birth a-stride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more.

It is of course true that comedy often deals with infirmities and physical decay, and even toys with death. But in Waiting for Godot the comic structure is incapable of supporting its own vision, because physical pain is transformed into metaphysical anguish.

A similar case can be made with respect to the verbal humor in the play. We can see how, in Waiting for Godot, language sometimes curves away from the comic and moves toward the tragic. One way to deal with the pain of the world is to turn it into an occasion for laughter. When Vladimir
and Estragon inspect the aged, doddering Lucky, Vladimir notices a sore on the slave's neck:

Estragon: Oh I say!
Vladimir: A running sore!
Estragon: It's the rope.
Vladimir: It's the rubbing.
Estragon: It's inevitable.
Vladimir: It's the knot.
Estragon: It's the chafing.

... Look at the slobber.
Vladimir: It's inevitable.
Estragon: Look at the slaver.
Vladimir: Perhaps he's a halfwit.
Estragon: A cretin.
Vladimir: (looking closer). Looks like goiter.
Estragon: (ditto). It's not certain.
Vladimir: He's panting.
Estragon: It's inevitable. (*Waiting for Godot*, p. 17)

Here the movement of the dialogue is more important than its content: the comic rhythm of the language seems to disengage itself from the actual pain under discussion. More often than not, Vladimir and Estragon's banter is a way of dealing with isolation and emptiness:

Estragon: That's the idea, let's abuse each other. They turn, move apart, turn again and face each other.
Vladimir: Moron!
Estragon: Vermin!
Vladimir: Abortion!
Estragon: Morpion!
Vladimir: Sewer-rat!
Estragon: Curate!
Vladimir: Cretin!
Estragon: (with finality). Crritic!
Vladimir: Oh!
He wilts, vanquished, and turns away.
Estragon: Now let's make it up. (*Waiting for Godot*, p. 48)
When banter is exaggerated and exhausted, the language often curves away from the comic, transforming pain into elegiac beauty:

Estragon: All the dead voices.
Vladimir: They make a noise like wings.
Estragon: Like leaves.
Vladimir: Like sand.
Estragon: Like leaves.
Vladimir: They all speak at once.
Estragon: Each one to itself.
Vladimir: Rather they whisper.
Estragon: They rustle.
Vladimir: They murmur.
Estragon: They rustle.
Vladimir: What do they say?
Estragon: They talk about their lives.
Vladimir: To have lived is not enough for them.
Estragon: They have to talk about it.
Vladimir: To be dead is not enough for them.
Estragon: It is not sufficient.
Vladimir: They make a noise like feathers.
Estragon: Like leaves.
Vladimir: Like ashes.
Estragon: Like leaves. (Waiting for Godot, p. 40)

It seems clear in passages like these that Beckett wishes to hold up to us the power of language to shape, control, and subdue reality, and in so doing he touches on the power of myth and art in general. But it is part of the overall deformation of the comic that the linguistic conversion of pain into laughter or beauty—like the transformation of physical limitations—ultimately fails to sustain the characters. It is typical, for example, that Vladimir and Estragon's verbal exchanges end in long silences and anguish:
Vladimir: Say something!
Estragon: I'm trying.

Long silence.

Vladimir: (in anguish). Say anything at all!

*Waiting for Godot,* pp. 40-41)

Language breaks down, and then their terrible isolation rushes in and threatens to drown them. There are parallels here, I think, to Ishmael's attempt to come to terms with the mystery and power of Moby Dick through language. Ishmael tries to absorb the experience of the whale comically and lyrically, but finds, too, that language goes only so far: "Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will.

There are other ways in which we can see the deformation of comedy in *Waiting for Godot.* Comedy often leans heavily on repetition of situation or speech. One of the oldest visual jokes—the man slipping on the banana peel—seems to get funnier with successive victims. And audiences never tired of Jack Benny's famous "Well!" There is much repetition of both situation and speech in *Waiting for Godot*—repetition, in fact, is one of the central supports of its structure. Frye notes that "Repetition overdone or not going anywhere belongs to comedy,"11 and this would certainly describe *Waiting for Godot.* We derive a great deal of pleasure and comic security from simple repetition, and this suggests that comedy relies much less on the unusual than it does on the everyday and routine. But in *Waiting for Godot*
repetition is stretched too far. The hat-exchanging episode in the play, for example, begins in vaudevillian humor but ultimately suggests repetition that is absurd and empty of humor. Repetition stretched ad infinitum seems to twist pleasure and security into nightmare.

The notion of comic deformation is not meant to suggest that the humor of the play is undermined. Anyone who has seen *Waiting for Godot* knows that it is powerfully funny. But it does suggest that although the humor of the play is preserved, the comic spirit curves away from its initial impulse and moves in a darker, more painful direction. Indeed, we can say that the funnier the play, the more painful it is. In this the drama as a whole echoes the plight of Vladimir: the louder he laughs, the greater his pain. Comedy in *Waiting for Godot* ultimately deepens and enlarges tragedy.

The frustration or pain that is the product of comic deformation in *Waiting for Godot* is intensified by its tragic elements. One of the most powerful of these is the representation of time as destroyer. According to Harold Watts, "tragedy is that representation of life that asserts the linear, the non-cyclic." Frye concurs: whereas "In comedy time plays a redeeming role," in many tragedies "we can trace the feeling that nemesis is deeply involved with the movement of time." In *Waiting for Godot* the movement of time comes to us not as a mere feeling, but as the central fact of existence. We can observe the destructiveness of time in
several ways. The most obvious of these is physical and personal. Man ages and decays. His feet begin to ache. Eventually he loses his sight and speech. Finally he dies. Says Pozzo: "the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more." On another level, the idea of history as man's continuing effort, achievement, and progress—spiritual, philosophical, scientific, and cultural—is also moribund. This seems to be the import of Lucky's speech in Act I, a deteriorating cacophany that suggests the end of man's record of himself. The speech rambles, falls apart, and finally ends in an image of death ("the skull"). Nature, too, seems unable to withstand the ravages of time. Although there is a hint of spring, the mood of the play suggests that nature, too, has grown old—it seems barren, parched, incapable of true regeneration. And if this is the case, the representation of time as all-devouring has cosmic implications as well, because the feebleness of regeneration—as well as the absence of morning and afternoon from the daily cycle—indicates that both earth and sun are dying.

The play also suggests man's "confrontation with Time" by the particular way in which it draws upon the quest motif. We have already seen how tragedy might make use of the quest motif to give form and meaning to its vision. In Moby-Dick, for example, the quest motif is close to its archetypal form, and serves to contrast Ahab's mythic conception of reality and Ishmael's more modern, historical conception.
In *The Princess Casamassima* James politicizes the terms of the quest. And in *The Trial* Kafka distorts the quest and thereby draws a tragedy of modern man, a victim in a world of collapsing meaning. In *Waiting for Godot* the quest appears in distilled form. There is a road and a tree: the setting suggests that life is a journey and that there is, perhaps, a center of meaning (the tree is related to the worship of Dionysus, and of course recalls the Tree of Knowledge, the Cross, the "world axis"). The hero of the quest is that special man who overcomes the obstacles of this world and reaches the "center of life"—in other words, that man who suffers the tests and pains of the mundane world but who ultimately participates in (and indeed re-creates) the divine. It is easy to see, for example, that Ahab is modeled after the mythic hero, and that the action of *Moby-Dick* repeats the central movement of the quest. To pierce the wall of the white whale is to tear away what Ahab calls the "pasteboard masks" of reality. In a psychological version of the quest, the natural monster of the myth might appear, for example, as the real or imagined ogre-father who terrorizes the hero. In either case the successful passage of the hero—his "arrival"—is marked by his victory over obstacles and by his ability to see reality clearly. In *Waiting for Godot* there are no natural or psychological monsters, but there is that which these images come to symbolize—the essential limitations of human existence, especially Time. And the "monster" Time
is so horrible because it is so pure, unspecified, and abstract. Even the salvation of action is denied to us in this play. For unlike other quest stories, which take the hero through a series of adventures that lead to his final test, the action of Waiting for Godot is frozen: all forward movement is impossible and every moment appears very much like every other moment. This makes the play all the more painful and its tragedy all the more primitive and intense, for Beckett mercilessly reveals to us a horrible truth: that the spiritual burden represented by the quest pattern is in reality a burden that weighs upon us at every moment of our lives. That is why, I think, it is possible to imagine the play lasting but an instant on the one hand and an eternity on the other.

The play's emphasis on man's confrontation with time points to what is perhaps its most powerfully tragic expression: the concentrated examination of man's isolation in the universe around him. In general, it is no doubt true that while comedy is rooted in the seasonal and the communal, tragedy comes to fruition in the linear and the individual. Comedy celebrates community; Shakespeare's comedies, for example, often end in multiple marriages. But the tragic vision is narrower and deeper: it asks pointblank, "What is man?" At its most intense, tragedy conveys that moment when evil, virtue, foolishness, or conspiring fate reveals the isolation of individual man. Hamlet's "To be, or not to be"
is one such moment, as is Macbeth's vision of horror beyond horror:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time...

No doubt, too, Shakespeare intends to show us "unaccommodated man" when he takes Lear from throne to heath, from kingship to madness, from the safety of the court to the blasts of nature. And we should note as well that Oedipus' tragedy is made possible (that is, he is proclaimed king and given Jocasta as queen) by his ability to answer the riddle of the sphinx—that is, by an apparently instinctive understanding of man's condition. The rhythm of tragedy is inextricably tied to the revelation of man's isolation. While many tragedies show us the increasing separateness of their characters, Waiting for Godot begins with separation and then painfully intensifies the isolation of its characters. Vladimir and Estragon appear on a lonely road, and the first words of the play—"Nothing to be done"—suggest that their isolation is fixed and unalterable. In this way Beckett announces from the outset that his play will take up a theme explored by nearly all tragedies since Prometheus Bound: the relationship between individual man and the cosmos around him. In Waiting for Godot this relationship is given literal and primitive expression, for one of the play's most haunting elements is the characters' isolation amidst the vastness of
space. It is of course true that Vladimir and Estragon have each other, and Beckett shows us thereby not only that the pain of separation can be eased, but that shared misery has comic potential. But as Walter Kerr has suggested, the most profound and most painful moments in the play are those which show us that the tramps' companionship is unable to deflect the misery of their condition, and that each life is ultimately self-contained and spiritually orphaned:

Vladimir: Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of to-day? That with Estragon my friend, at this place, until the fall of night, I waited for Godot? That Pozzo passed, with his carrier, and that he spoke to us? Probably. But in all that what truth will there be?

(Estragon, having struggled with his boots in vain, is dozing off again. Vladimir looks at him.) He'll know nothing. He'll tell me about the blows he received and I'll give him a carrot. (Pause.) Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. (He listens.) But habit is a great deadener. (He looks again at Estragon.) At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, He is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on. (Pause.) I can't go on! (Pause.) What have I said? (Waiting for Godot, p.58)

The most horrible version of isolation is that in which man's agony is meaninglessly absorbed into the vast space around him.
Although it seems clear that certain specific features of *Waiting for Godot* recall the elements of tragedy, what can we say of the work as a whole? The play has often been linked to the theater of the absurd, and as such it seems infertile soil for tragedy. In *Tragedy and Philosophy*, for example, Walter Kaufmann argues that

> After Auschwitz and Nagasaki, a new generation wonders how one can make so much fuss about Oedipus, Orestes, or Othello. What's Hecuba to us? Or Hamlet? Or Hippolytus? Beckett's [sic] *Waiting for Godot* and Ionesco's *Lesson* are less optimistic, have less faith in reason and no confidence at all in progress, but are closer to the feelings of those born during or after World War II. If the world is absurd and a thoughtful person has a choice of different kinds of despair, why should one not prefer to laugh at man's condition?—a black laugh?21

No doubt this is so. But perhaps, too, it is not the whole story. For if tragedy has its origins in ritual sacrifice and if, therefore, its central rhythm often suggests disintegration followed by real or potential regeneration, it is clear that *Waiting for Godot* approximates the tragic vision. Certainly the play focuses on the dissolution of structure and meaning and not on the emergence of a new and sturdier order. But there is a broad range of social and cosmic regeneration in tragedy: while it is powerful and organic in Greek tragedy, it is almost an afterthought in *Hamlet*, and perhaps altogether absent in *King Lear*. More importantly, I think, is the possibility that "absurdity" is not necessarily
antithetical nor even foreign to tragedy—the possibility that the two are in some ways closely related. In Nietzsche's discussion of tragedy, for example, absurdity appears as a precondition of tragic action. Hamlet is a Dionysian man who has discovered the nature of existence:

...Dionysian man may be said to resemble Hamlet: both have for once seen into the true nature of things,—they have perceived, but they are loath to act; for their action cannot change the eternal nature of things...In the consciousness of the truth he has perceived, man now sees everywhere only the awfulness of the absurdity of existence, he now understands the symbolism in the fate of Ophelia...22

Out of the awful truth at the center of life arises the tragic form. In the conjunction of madness and greatness in Hamlet, or in the agonized but beautiful dance of madman, fool, and king in Lear, Shakespeare seems to touch the primitive nerves of tragedy. From this point of view it is possible to see how the tragic hero is related to his mythic ancestor: both often possess a knowledge and a singularity of vision that are their agony even as they are their victory. They are easily distinguished by the physical or psychological wounds that mark them—blindness, madness, etc. In Waiting for Godot the central characters—and especially Vladimir—have also looked into the heart of life, and their wound is physical and spiritual inertia. And like their mythic and tragic ancestors, these characters display a singularity of will not untouched by divine foolishness,
because their persistence in waiting for the mysterious Godot defies absurd reality and urges the impossible. It is for this reason, perhaps, that for all its bleakness, Waiting for Godot, like so many tragedies, points towards transcendence even as it dissolves the world.

As in the other works discussed here, the peculiar strength of Waiting for Godot derives in part from the conjunction of mythic and modern landscape. Its mythic context tauntingly whispers the promise of life, but its actual landscape mourns the end of life: man dies, history dies, nature dies, the cosmos, too, dies. Beckett's world is Kafka's world grown old: having spent itself in metaphysical torment, it now waits—aged, somewhat less anxious, even joking—for salvation or damnation. In Waiting for Godot Beckett offers us what is perhaps the final version of historical man. Like Lucky, he stoops under the weight of his own knowledge. Reason has failed to explain the universe, and so it appears, at the last, empty of all meaning. Yet here, too, at the end of time, history seems to curve back into myth, just as the play itself seems to return to ritual form. In this context, waiting for the mysterious Godot is the only meaningful—and therefore the only tragic—act, because he suggests the salvation of history. In this curious world, where reason has exhausted itself and collapsed under its own weight, it is the appearance of the irrational that would signal the re-structuring of life.
This essay ends as it began: by suggesting that criticism of Waiting for Godot leads us to the point of mystery. So unlike other tragedies in characterization and plot, Waiting for Godot nevertheless suggests in remarkably similar ways the mood and movement of the tragic form. For in this play we descend into the abyss and yet somehow manage to return, no doubt shaken but also whole, quietly marveling at man's sufferance.
FOOTNOTES


5 Frye, p. 178.


8 Kerr, p. 155.

9 This point is very well made by Ramona Cormier and Janis L. Pallister, "En attendant Godot: Tragedy or Comedy?" L'Esprit Créateur, 11 (Fall 1971), 45-6.


11 Frye, p. 168.

12 Watts, p. 77.

13 Frye, p. 213.

14 This point is also suggested by Daniel Stempel, "History Electrified into Anagogy: A Reading of Waiting for Godot," Contemporary Literature, 17 (Spring 1976), 263-78, who argues that Waiting for Godot is informed by Spengler's conception of cyclical history, and that the play takes place between cycles. Specifically, Estragon and Vladimir, according to Stempel, "represent Judaism and Christianity in the last phase of our culture, the Winter of western Europe, a dying civilization." Rolf Breuer, "The Solution as Problem: Beckett's Waiting for Godot, Modern Drama, 19 (September 1976), 225-36, also notes the historical inertia of the play. Breuer suggests that "Waiting for Godot may have been intended as an ironic commentary on Joachim's naively progressivistic ideas of history: since acts one and two are so much the same, nothing better is to be expected from a third one."
Richard Schechner, "There's Lots of Time in Godot," Modern Drama, 9 (December 1966), 270.


David Helsa, The Shape of Chaos: An Interpretation of the Art of Samuel Beckett (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1971), p. 131, notes that in Waiting for Godot "Time is the common enemy."

This horror is one that occurs to Melville, too, and apparently with equal intensity. When, in Moby-Dick, the "castaway" Pip falls overboard, he feels in the wide ocean "The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity." As a result, Pip goes mad, at least by conventional standards: "He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God." Pip's "visionary madness" is particularly attractive to Ahab, who feels a special affinity for the youngster. Coleridge also explores the experience of isolation. His Ancient Mariner recalls the horror of concentrated loneliness:

Alone, alone, all, all alone,
Alone on a wide wide sea!
And never a saint took pity on
My soul in agony.

Kerr, pp. 181-82.


Nietzsche, p. 328.
One obvious danger in the kind of analysis offered in the preceding pages is that it can become formulaic. Literature does not readily conform to formula, and criticism that approaches literature through formula may illuminate but may also oversimplify and even skew its reality. Tragedy has on occasion been subject to this kind of treatment. But this is understandable. We have always given tragedy critical and philosophical preeminence; of all the forms of literature, tragedy, we say, is perhaps the most accurate representation of life. It is only natural, therefore, that we seek to understand its workings and explain its effect. One type of formulaic approach that is applied to tragic literature is interpretation by means of definition—that is, the attempt to show how a given tragedy conforms or does not conform to a specific formal or philosophical system. There is obvious value in this: the definition tests the legitimacy of works under consideration, and—whether or not we agree with the assessment—provides us with a way to measure one tragedy against another. At the same time, however, this approach draws a perimeter on material that may by its nature resist quantification. Another formulaic approach—one whose spirit, if not method, is freely borrowed here—is that
which interprets tragedy as a retelling of myth and ritual. The advantage of this kind of approach is that it provides a lens through which we may begin to see the depth and height of the tragic vision; it also provides a language to express the range of tragedy, from the intensely psychological through the cosmic and theological. But this approach can also distort, because it may confuse myth and tragedy.

While we acknowledge this danger, we should nevertheless recognize that the re-emergence of literature that draws upon myth—not merely by way of allusion, but in its basic conception—is of critical and historical significance. It may be explained as an instinctive as well as conscious response to literary and philosophical forces, specifically during the Neoclassical period, that argued for a separation of literature from content considered fanciful and non-rational. Samuel Johnson attacked the "inherent improbability" of the pastoral and mythological machinery in "Lycidas," for example, and said this of Milton's elegy: "In this poem there is no nature, for there is no truth;..." It is clear that the widespread use of myth during the Romantic period—by Blake, Keats, and Shelley, for example—was part of a larger philosophical reaction that sought to redefine the relationship between "truth" and "nature," and that myth was often the language of that redefinition. That this is not only of literary significance, but of cultural and spiritual significance as well, is evident in Carlyle's urgent apostrophe to
Voltaire in *Sartor Resartus*:

Sufficiently hast thou demonstrated this proposition, considerable or otherwise: That the Mythus of the Christian Religion looks not in the eighteenth century as it did in the eighth. Alas, were thy six-and-thirty quartos, and the six-and-thirty thousand other quartos and folios, and flying sheets or reams, printed before and since on the same subject, all needed to convince us of so little! But what next? Wilt thou help us to embody the divine Spirit of that Religion in a new Mythus, in a new vehicle and vesture, that our souls, otherwise too like perishing, may live?  

In our own century, particularly following World War I, the need for "a new Mythus"—for a unifying sense of spirit and civilization—appeared even more urgent. In 1919 Yeats wrote:

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,...

It is with this sense of the directionlessness and fragmentation of our world that Eliot happily described Frazer's *The Golden Bough* as "a revelation of that vanished mind of which our mind is a continuum." Two years later, in a similar vein, Eliot would describe Joyce's "mythical method" in *Ulysses* as "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history."

The four works discussed here come out of this historical context, and, in different ways, are informed by the "parallel
vision" of mythic and local reality that Eliot sees in *Ulysses*. All four point us in two directions at once. When we look outward, we see that the dimensions of their reality have been enlarged and made universal. When we look inward, we see faithful transcriptions of contemporary reality. As creatures of the twentieth century we may find this conjunction particularly suggestive, because it enables us to measure and perhaps contrast the conditions of our reality with those of a reality available to us only indirectly. Looked at from one point of view we thus find, I think, that these works clearly illustrate the critical notion that in our age it is difficult, if not impossible, to produce tragedy—that our world is too absurd to allow tragedy to come to fruition, too dark for pure comedy, and that, enjoying the comfort of neither form, we hover painfully between the two. But perhaps, too, this is only one side of the story. For if the mythic context of these works allows us to see more deeply the failings of our world, as well as our separation from the past, it also so orients us that we can sense an underlying shape to reality and a consistency of experience. Beneath the broken images of our world, the tragi-mythic rhythm of the past can be heard, though muted or distorted. Without violating the reality of their own world, these authors draw our attention to another reality that offers both contrast and supplementary meaning.
What the foregoing remarks suggest, in broad terms, is that these works affirm, sometimes by intimation, the metaphysical reality of tragedy at the heart of existence. While they describe particular historical and cultural circumstance, they also stamp contemporary reality with the firm conception that existence itself is a tragic condition. Put another way, they suggest that the shapelessness of modern existence is perhaps but a part of a larger order of tragic reality that is accessible to us only in weakened or even distorted form. Viewed in this light, these works expose and also try to respond to the dilemma of mythless man, free to create the conditions of his reality but unable to give it permanent shape and meaning; while one dimension of these works poses the dilemma of historical man, another tentatively responds with tragi-mythic mystery. They do this by shadowing forth not only the characteristic contradictions of tragedy but also its mysterious vision of order.10

Such an analysis may be applied not only to the total architecture of these works, but to their specific heroes as well. Ever since Aristotle's description of the tragic hero critics have been concerned with his political and moral nobility. In our world it is often particularly difficult to speak of a character's "nobility" or "elevated stature."11 More often than not we feel comfortable describing our characters as "anti-heroes" or victims. Herbert Muller's assessment of modern tragic man is perhaps typical:
...the possibilities of high tragedy are most obviously limited by the characteristic realism of modern literature. As writers faithfully portray the life of their time, the scene dwindles into a parlor, the protagonist into a petty bourgeois. Some may focus on the ordinary, commonplace individual, the Bovary or Babbitt; others on the abnormal individual, the neurotic who we have come to realize is not so abnormal after all, but a brother in the unconscious. In either case the hero is naturally unheroic. If he stirs pity, he stirs little fear—except as we feel our own littleness and helplessness.12

After Ahab, who in many ways resembles the hero of the past, and who seems also to be a final expression of the type, we can measure the decline of stature in the heroes of these works. One obvious indication of this decline is their actual station in life. Ahab is the captain of a whaler, but Hyacinth Robinson is a poor bookbinder, Joseph K. is a bank clerk, and Vladimir and Estragon are tramps. We can also measure their decline in terms of their relationship to the society around them. The traditional tragic hero is often the axis on which the fate of society hinges, as is Oedipus, Lear, and Hamlet. As captain of the doomed microcosmic ship, Ahab is very much in keeping with this tradition. But in The Princess Casamassima, The Trial, and Waiting for Godot the characters become less axial and more peripheral. Charged to commit a murder that could lead to social and political upheaval, Hyacinth is a potential "axis" who nevertheless closes his life without affecting his world. Joseph K. is merely an anonymous cipher in a faceless world. And
Vladimir and Estragon live on the literal and figurative edges of life. Yet even as these characters clearly illustrate a dramatic reduction of tragic stature—and in our world, how could this be otherwise without violating reality?—the mythic context that helps shape their existence seems to give them, I think, a more traditional appearance. One way in which it does this is to insist on an obvious point: that while mythic narratives naturally lend themselves to aristocratic treatment, their deepest significance is always radically democratic. This is one of the beauties, for example, of Joyce's *Ulysses*. That is why these characters, three of whom are not, like older heroes, "great trees more likely to be struck by lightning," nevertheless share a trait sometimes considered essential to the tragic hero: human representativeness. Like the ritual scapegoat that they sometimes recall, these heroes—mad, poor, faceless, outcast—come to embody all mankind, and so become, paradoxically, axial heroes. We can easily recognize this in Ahab, whose obsession is a titanic expression of the anguish we all at times feel to be at the heart of life. So too does Hyacinth Robinson become axial, for his inaction is tragically greater than action: embodying the antitheses of life, in his suicide he is a martyr to the wholeness and integrity of reality. In *The Trial* the mythic dimension raises Joseph K. from nonentity to Everyman. He is both at once, for in this world all are as innocent and as guilty before the law. But
the most remarkable transformation of character occurs in *Waiting for Godot*, for here the edge becomes the axis, as Vladimir poignantly recognizes: "...at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not."

If literature is a celebration of life, and if tragedy is the highest form of literature, then it follows, paradoxically, that tragedy is the greatest expression of that celebration. Greater and deeper, it seems, than comedy, for as Walter Kerr suggests, our first and most fundamental perception of life is tragic, and the greatest literature, we feel, confronts life at its deepest and most painful point. And if it does that—and does it successfully—we feel, somehow, even at our darkest, that all is well. Comedy seems to come later, after we've experienced the convulsive-ness of tragedy. The Greek tragedians, who presumably placed their satyr plays at the end of their tragedies, clearly sensed this rhythm. It is surely no accident that some of the most memorable moments in tragedy express the conjunction of weakness and strength, despair and hope, the sense that man is a nothingness and the sense that he is partly divine. Hamlet's meditation on the nature of man,

What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angell! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?
is one illustration of this point. Ahab's recognition that his "topmost greatness" lies in his "topmost grief" is another. Yet it is true, too, that the conditions of our existence seem to militate against this kind of tragic expression. Grief we have—much more, perhaps, than any period in the past. Yet as Joseph Wood Krutch suggests, we are apparently powerless to transform grief into tragic beauty and tragic greatness, and so we live in an "age of anxiety" or an "age of pessimism." That each of the works discussed here explores that anxiety and pessimism, in one way or another, is one measure of their truthfulness as literature. That each one, through myth, tries to make sense of our world by defining it as part of a total and unified conception of life, is also a testament to the high level of tragedy to which they aspire.


3 Ibid., p. 1640.


8 Ibid., p. 483.


10 Richard Sewall, *The Vision of Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), pp. 84-95, makes a similar point. He suggests that the emergence of the tragic vision in the nineteenth-century novel (in America and Russia) was a response to the failure of Enlightenment, Romantic, and Victorian optimism "to accommodate individual experience." A related argument appears in N. Joseph Calarco's *Tragic Being: Apollo and Dionysus in Western Drama* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1969), pp. 127-28. Calarco suggests that "the tragic vision of historicism is necessarily limited," but that modern man can experience the awe and terror of tragedy when he looks beyond history to "the Dionysiac contradictions inherent in logic itself." And Joseph Campbell, "Mythological Themes in Creative Literature and Art," in *Myths, Dreams, and Religion*, ed. Joseph Campbell (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1970), pp. 170-71, suggests that the mythic dimension of post-World War I writers such as Eliot, Jung, Joyce, Spengler, and Mann came
at a critical point in our history: "It was very much as though, at a crucial juncture in the course of the growth of our civilization, a company of sages, masters of the wisdom that arises from the depths of being, had spoken from their hermitages to give warning and redirection."

11 See, for example, Walter Kaufmann, p. 376; Calarco's discussion of Realism and Naturalism in relation to character, pp. 160-62; and Dorothea Krook, Elements of Tragedy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), pp. 35-36.


14 Krook, pp. 36-37.


16 Walter Kerr, p. 23.


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Cormier, Ramona and Janis L. Pollister. "*En attendant Godot*: Tragedy or Comedy?" *L'Esprit Créateur*, 11 (Fall 1971), 44-54.


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