



## **Interpreting Melville's *Typee*: A Victorian Age Journey to Understanding Savage and Civilized Societies**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Herman Melville's novel, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*, is said to depict common travel writing themes such as confusion, discomfort, discovery and natural beauty. However, a more careful examination of the text reveals that there are strong social critiques of racism and imperialism and a struggle with what makes humans civilized beings or savages. The issue of cannibalism haunts the story, as do the abusive practices of colonial and whaling-ship officers, which provides the necessary suspense to carry the reader through the story to its end. Cannibalism as a cultural practice is explained according to the social and political context of contact with European aggression and devastation. By analysing the text using the concepts of hegemony and binary opposition, it is clear that Melville challenges the narrative that South Pacific natives were savage cannibals inferior to civilized Europeans. He shows that the apparent savage aggressiveness of the Typees and other South Pacific islanders, was not inherent to their culture but was provoked by attacks from outsiders, particularly Europeans and Americans.

*Keywords:* Barbaric, binary opposition, colonialism, hegemony, nature, culture

### **ARTICLE INFO**

*Article history:*

Received: 19 July 2012

Accepted: 31 July 2013

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Herman Melville, an American novelist, short-story writer, essayist and poet, is best known for his novel *Moby Dick* and the posthumous novella *Billy Budd*. His novel, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (henceforth *Typee*), was a bestseller and made him something of a celebrity. But, it was not until the "Melville Revival" in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century did his work win

recognition when his novel *Moby Dick* was hailed as one of the literary masterpieces of both the American and world literature. This led to him being the first writer to have his works collected and published by the Library of America. Although Melville was a citizen of the United States of America, his writing concerned itself deeply with nations and themes of nationhood in the century of European and American empire-building (Kelley, 2006, p. 9).

His adventure stories in the South Seas helped him to see clearly the acts of colonizers against native cultures. In his narrative, *Typee*, Melville was supportive of the right of the islanders to speak their native languages and expressed his opposition to American annexation of those islands (ibid.). Measuring his perceptions against those of travellers prejudiced against native cultures, Melville drew on European models of contact with primitive people to challenge American racial and ethnic stereotypes and to contradict prevailing assumptions about what constitute “civilized” and “savage” societies. To further reinforce his views, Melville wrote a sequel to his first novel *Typee* called *Omoo*. This book takes the case against “civilization” even further by describing the disastrous effects of contact with “the white civilized man ... the most ferocious animal on the face of the earth” (Melville, 1846, p. 125). It is therefore the focus of this paper to highlight Melville’s intention to champion the rights of native societies by narrowing down onto the binary oppositions of civilized/ savage and cultured/ barbaric analysis, and examining

the hegemonic legitimization of imperialist power. In order to help understand Melville’s *Typee*, a short summary of the novel will assist the reader to comprehend it before certain concepts are introduced and an analysis of this novel is conducted.

### **SYNOPSIS OF *TYPEE***

Melville created a narrative character called Tommo to help portray his experiences as a sailor on a whaling ship called the *Dolly*, and his adventures living among the Typee people after escaping from harsh treatment on the *Dolly*. The lack of adequate food and water, along with abuse from a seemingly insane ship’s captain, compelled Melville (henceforth referred to as Tommo) to plot with a shipmate, Toby, to take their chances among the fierce cannibals living on Nuku Hiva, one of the Marquesas Islands, rather than continue to suffer on the ship.

Tommo and Toby imagined that they would find an abundance of food on Nuku Hiva and could hide in the forest, eating fruit and drinking clean water from nearby streams, until they could secure work on the next whaling ship that came into harbour. They discovered after they had escaped that food was only really available in the valleys inhabited by local islanders. Not wanting to be eaten by the famed cannibals, Tommo and Toby did their best to stay in the forest but eventually succumbed to hunger and a strange illness that crippled Tommo’s legs. They approached a community who were the fiercest and most cannibalistic of all, true “lovers of human flesh,” the Typee.

The Typees were surprisingly hospitable

and fed Tommo and Toby well. Their days and nights were marked by sleeping, eating and lounging around. Tommo befriended a chief who gave a glowing account of life on the island. The chief's son was assigned to be Tommo's caregiver, and he fed Tommo by hand and carried him on his back to bathe in a nearby lake. Tommo and a young woman called Fayaway developed an attraction for each other and spent many days and evenings in chaste company. He affirmed never having seen the remains of human victims that previous authors had claimed abounded on the altars (p. 21). The relics of sacrifice he did see were only fruit (p. 12). However, Toby, his companion, kept reading the signs differently and nursed fears of "being sacrificed by the ferocious islanders" (p. 13). Toby, and at times, Tommo, feared that they were being fattened for slaughter, and so Toby made his escape to get help from a ship in port on the other, pacified, side of the island.

Toby never came back. All alone, Tommo went back and forth between contentedness and anxiety, marvelling at the nobility of the Typees yet fearing they would suddenly eat him. Despite the attractions of a carefree island life, Tommo could not overcome his restlessness and anxiety. He felt that if he chose to stay in the islands, he would have to be tattooed, a practice that both attracted and repelled him. In any event, it would have marked his face indelibly, making it difficult, if not impossible, for him to go home again.

In time, Tommo's leg, though previously healed, becomes swollen and lame again,

causing him great distress. He fears that if he does not get medical help from a ship's doctor, the sickness may permanently cripple him, if not kill him. In addition, he feels that some of the Typees want to eat him as part of some pagan sacrifice. He wants for no food or comfort, but upon hearing that Toby may have returned with a small boat for him, Tommo manages to approach the shore. Although not Toby, a Polynesian sailor is there with gifts to try and barter Tommo's safe release. After a violent and emotional struggle, Tommo leaves his dear Fayaway and the Typees behind him and sets off to resume his life as a sailor until his return to America, which is chronicled in a subsequent novel, *Omoo*.

#### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: BINARY OPPOSITIONS AND HEGEMONY**

New insights into the meaning and significance of Melville's first book *Typee* can be discovered by the use of binary analysis, as originally developed by Claude Levi-Strauss, combined with Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony. We argue that Melville developed a binary way of thinking about and describing the Western society and the societies of the South Pacific. At its most fundamental, this binary thinking is reduced to binary pairs. Many of Melville's commentaries and descriptions fall into one or other of these binary pairs and the text became quite clear when placed into these categories. Understanding the view Melville had of Western society (the civilized) and South Pacific Island society

(the savages) becomes clearer when the categorized text is then viewed in relation to the concept of hegemony. Hegemony, with its focus on the ideological legitimization of subjecting colonies and Other people to Western European power and domination, provides Melville with the basis for his critique of European imperialism.

### **SIMPLIFICATION THROUGH BINARY OPPOSITIONS**

Claude Levi-Strauss, a French anthropologist, is best known for his development of structural anthropology. In his book, *The Raw and the Cooked* (1969), he explains how the structures of myths provide basic structures for understanding cultural relations. Lévi-Strauss had as his goal creating an inventory of mental patterns. He was trying to reduce the diversity of cultural behaviours and devised a small number of simple principles. One that emerged from his efforts and followed him is binary analysis, in which one principle presupposes its opposite. The most basic principle is positive and can only be understood in relation to a negative. These oppositions form the basic structure for all ideas and concepts in a culture (2009, p. 1). From this concept, we can derive such oppositions as nature/ culture, raw/ cooked, us/ them, savage/ civilized, and so on. There is certainly much about social life or literary texts that depict social life that can be analyzed and explained by using binary analysis. Melville's *Typee* is full of opposites that are showed clearly by Tommo, Melville's narrator, and his attitudes toward the local people.

### **CIVILIZED/SAVAGE**

Most of the characterizations and descriptions which Melville uses for people and places throughout the novel, *Typee*, can be reduced to the binary opposition of civilized/savage. Civilized is most often used to characterize complex societies with central governments, armies, specialized classes of people, monumental architecture and road systems, a diverse economy and a highly refined form of the Arts (literature, fine arts, music, elaborate dress). Savage is most often used to characterize simple societies with no form of government, bands of armed men at best and people who are seemingly all the same in terms of occupation, dress and material wealth, and with no cultural arts. The two kinds of societies and the people within them are the opposites of each other. Melville plays with this sense of opposition in his descriptions of civilized Westerners and savage Typees. Seeing the degree to which Melville uses this binary opposition enables a clear understanding of his desire to ask questions on the basis of ethics and well-being concerning which society is actually the civilized one and which is actually quite savage.

There are several binary oppositions that are subsets or elaborations of the primary opposition, civilized/ savage. Listing them will help to see how his text easily falls into one or other category. Some examples of subsets of binary opposition are:

*Western/South Pacific islander;  
sophisticated/crude; developed/  
close to nature (culture/nature);*

*literate/illiterate; cultured/uncultured; violent/peaceful; beautiful/ugly; clean/dirty; pure or pristine/contaminated; good/bad; cooked/raw; us/them or other; advanced/backward; enlightened/brutish.*

The list goes on, but the above is sufficient for the purposes of analysis in this essay.

*Typee* as a story begins by Melville depicting the horrible conditions in which he and his shipmates are forced to labour as sailors on a whaling ship. The captain of the ship is characterized as a brutal and insane man. The food is shown to be far from adequate and the health of the crew very poor, with some languishing near death and no medical care or effort made to secure their health. The ship has been unsuccessful in hunting whales and filling its hull with oil, and there appears to be no stop to the effort despite the crew being on the edge of collapse. Water is in very short supply and of poor quality. In a word, conditions are *uncivilized*. Unbeknown to the reader, Melville is setting up his first binary opposite, with the ship and its captain being bad, dirty, unhealthy, evil, miserly, corrupt, greedy, and the like. Given this situation, Melville, personified through the narrating character, Tommo, deserts the ship with a companion, Toby, and prefers taking his life in his hands among the savage cannibals on the shore, rather than further risking death on the ship.

The squalid conditions on the ship are quickly portrayed as opposite via a description of the lush and beautiful environment on NukuHiva Island, in which Tommo and Toby are travelling. If the ship represents culture, then NukuHiva is nature, unspoilt by culture. Melville begins his narrative by describing the whaling ship, and what it represents is to be understood as being in direct contrast to his unfolding understanding of what the South Pacific islands and its peoples are. This is clearly shown through the protagonist's observation: "It is impossible that the inhabitants of such a lovely place as we saw carry anything else but good fellows" (p. 73). This was said about the beautiful valley of the *Typee* and the need for the characters to set aside their fear of cannibalism in order to find food among the people before perishing from hunger. One of the characters, Toby, exclaims, "Why, they are cannibals!" However, Tommo believes that "a more humane, gentlemanly, and amiable set of epicures do not probably exist in the Pacific" (p. 119).

Melville, through his narrator, further develops the oppositions between the *Typee* (as representatives of the South Pacific natives) and Western people. Melville is very sympathetic and admiring of the natives and very critical of his own Western culture. Who are the civilized and who are the savages becomes blurred, if not outright reversed. Much of the story is a play on this reversal of positions. Through the play on who is civilized and who is savage, Melville constructs an argument that life



and the environment in the South Pacific are preferable to Western society and its lands. He implies this view more strongly in the following examples from the text; when he speaks about the beauty and majesty of the breadfruit tree, a primary food source, Melville says, “The autumnal glens of our great American forests, glorious as they are, sink into nothing in comparison this tree” (p. 138). He then makes more comparisons between the Typee and American society in relation to various behaviours of the natives:

*The minds of these simple savages, unoccupied by matters of greater moment, were capable of deriving the utmost delight from circumstances which would have passed unnoticed in more intelligent communities* (p. 172).

*A gentleman of Typee can bring up a numerous family of children and give them all a highly respectable cannibal education, with infinitely less toil and anxiety than he expends in the simple process of striking the light [a tiresome process of rubbing sticks together]; whilst to a poor European participant, who through the instrumentality of a Lucifer [match or flint] performs the same operation in one second, is put to his wits end to provide for his starving offspring that food which the children of a Polynesian father, without troubling their parent, pluck from the branches of every tree around them* (p. 136).

*I was seen to confess that, despite the disadvantages of his condition, the Polynesian savage, surrounded by all the luxurious provisions of nature, enjoyed an infinitely happier, though certainly a less intellectual existence, than the self-complacent European* (p. 149).

Melville makes constant comparisons between the Typee and American society. Speaking of their propensity for climbing coconut trees, Melville says, “I have seen children, scarcely five years of age, fearlessly climbing the slender pole of a young coconut tree, and while hanging perhaps 50 feet from the ground, received the plaudits of their parents beneath, who clapped their hands, and encouraged them to mount still higher ... what, thought I, on first witnessing one of these exhibitions, would the nervous mothers of America and England say to a similar display of hardiness in any of their children? The Lacedemonian matrons might have approved of it, but most modern dames would have gone into hysterics at the sight” (p. 251); and “Among the permanent inmates of the house were several lovely damsels, who instead of reading novels, like more enlightened young ladies, substituted for these employments the manufacture of a fine species of tapa; but for the greater portion of the time were skipping from house to house, gadding and gossiping with their acquaintances” (p. 105).

Speaking of the way Typee select the coconuts they will consume, Melville says, “many of them reject the food altogether

except a particular period of its growth, which, incredible as it may appear, they seem to me to be able to ascertain within an hour or two. Others are still more capricious in their tastes; and after gathering together a heap of the nuts of all ages, and ingeniously tapping them, will sip first from one and then from another, as fastidiously as some delicate wine-bibber experimenting glass in hand among his dusty demijohns of different vintages” (p. 250). This passage indicates that Melville considers the islanders to be sophisticated, and the only difference from Europeans is that they drink coconut juice instead of wine.

*In a primitive state of society, the enjoyments of life, if you are simple, are spread over a great extent, and are unalloyed; but civilization, for every advantage she imparts, holds 100 evils in reserve - the heart burnings, the jealousies, the social rivalries, the family dissensions, and the thousand self-inflicted discomforts of a refined life, which make up in units the swelling aggregate of human misery, are unknown among these unsophisticated people ... The term “Savage” is, I conceive, often misapplied (pp. 149–150).*

Another set of binary oppositions seen in *Typee* involves the story of when the Typee people went fishing with nets. Here, Melville illustrates two oppositions, raw/cooked and generous/greedy with the Typee being the first and Westerners or Americans

being the second. In the story many, but not all, the Typee went fishing, and did so about once a month Melville tells us in the story. The fish caught are however divided in such a way that everyone in the valley gets a share of the fish, even if they did nothing to catch them. Tommo marvels at the generosity of the Typee and how they do not care if a person eating the fish worked for his or her share or not. Tommo is equally surprised at the fact that the Typee do not cook the fish prior to eating it but simply eat the fish raw, including the intestines. He describes his beloved Fayaway delicately eating the small fish, head and all. He cannot see how fish can be eaten so naturally, uncooked, but discovers the fish to be delicious raw. This shows the nobility and close-to-nature tendencies of the Typee in contrast to Tommo, himself a Westerner and American corrupted by civilization with its need for cooked food and a “don’t eat if you don’t work” philosophy.

#### **CULTURED/ BARBARIC**

Speaking of a nose flute, Melville says “this is a favorite recreation with the females, and one in which Fayaway greatly excelled. Awkward as such an instrument may appear, it was, in Fayaway’s delicate little hands, one of the most graceful I have ever seen. A [European] young lady, in the act of tormenting a guitar strung about her neck by a couple of yards of blue ribbon, is not half so engaging” (p. 265).

*When I remembered that these islanders derived no advantage from dress, but appeared in all*

*the naked simplicity of nature, I could not avoid comparing them with a fine gentleman and dandies who promenade such unexceptional figures in our frequented thoroughfares. Stripped of the cunning artificers of the tailor ... what a sorry set come round-shouldered, spindle-shanked, craned-neck varlets would civilized men appear! Stuffed hats, padded breasts, and scientifically cut pantaloons will avail them [Typee men] nothing, and the effect would be truly deplorable [because they are muscular and well-proportioned to begin with] (pp. 213-14).*

Melville does not seem to think that people can blend traits and create a hybrid between binary opposites. His own struggle with being a European, yet wanting to be a member of the Typee, is partial evidence. Other evidence is shown by his attitude toward the royal family of Hawaii. Speaking of King Kamehameha III, Melville says his “gracious Majesty” is a “fat, lazy, Negro looking blockhead, with as little character as power. He has lost all noble traits of the barbarian, without acquiring the redeeming graces of a civilized; and, although member of the Hawaiian Temperance Society is a most inveterate dram drinker. The “blood royal” is an extremely sick, depraved fluid; formed principally of raw fish ... and European sweetmeats, and is charged with a variety of eruptive humours, which are developed in sundry blotches and pimples

on the August face of “majesty itself” (pp. 222–223).

He continues to make the case that making a hybrid of the Western, Christian, civilized man out of native islanders would simply make their lives worse. “Better will it be for them forever to remain the happy and innocent heathens and barbarians that they now are, than, like the wretched inhabitants of the Sandwich Islands, to enjoy the mere name of Christians without experiencing any of the vital operations of true religion, whilst, at the same time, they are made the victims of the worst devices and evils of civilized life” (p. 215).

## HEGEMONY AND COLONIALISM

Just as Levi-Strauss used structuralism as a theory and binary analysis as a technique to understand culture and society, Antonio Gramsci used Marxism as a theory and the concept of hegemony to understand social inequalities, power and the underlying ideology that justifies domination. Hegemony is a term that refers to the dominance of one state over others in a confederation. The concept was further developed and is usually understood to mean domination by consent of the people or a country (Gramsci, 1994, p. 67). Gramsci developed this term and made it popular in the 1930s in his book, *The Prison Notebooks*. Essentially, hegemony is the power and authority of the elite class to convince those below them that the interests of the elite are the interests of everyone (Ashcroft *et al.*, 2007, pp. 106–107).



Hegemony entails creating an ideology that justifies exploitation, an ideology that is considered a natural fact of the world. This is the key to understanding Melville's view of Western society and South Pacific society. Western society, in the heat of the Industrial Revolution, needed whale oil just as it needed coal, cotton, timber and other raw materials from around the world. An ideology of Western superiority of a natural right to take and dominate was needed to explain away the atrocities occurring in places such as the South Pacific and Polynesia (not to mention India, China, Africa and the American West). By using binary labels that natives were savage heathens, cannibals even and therefore in need of conversion to Christianity and cultural uplifting, hegemonic rule was enabled. Melville, through playing on who really is the savage and who really is the civilized in *Typee*, powerfully critiques Western hegemony before hegemony was recognised as a concept.

The West's claim that the South Pacific islanders are savages and naturally violent is contested by Melville. He argues that their violent reputation, and even cannibalism, is the result of being provoked, of the aggression by enemies, particularly Westerners. Melville essentially argues that the very quality, savageness, that separates civilized Westerners from savage natives such as the *Typee*, and which justifies hegemonic and imperial domination, is in fact provoked by Western aggression and exploitation. The following are examples of this critique:

*When the inhabitants of some sequestered island first describe the big canoe of the European rolling through the blue waters toward their shores, they rush down to the beach in crowds, and with open arms stand ready to embrace the strangers. Fatal embrace! They hold to their bosoms the vipers whose stay is destined to poison all their joys; and the instinctive feeling of love within their breasts is soon converted into the bitterest hate (p. 37).*

*On arriving at their destination, they burn, slaughter, and destroy, according to the tenor of unwritten instructions, and sailing away from the scene of devastation, call upon all Christendom to applaud their courage and justice (p. 137).*

*Who can wonder at the deadly hatred of Typees to all foreigners after such unprovoked atrocities? (p. 37).*

This was said after describing how the *Typees* defeated the French and their helpers from other valleys, and how the French burned all of the houses and fields upon their retreat.

*How often is the term savages incorrectly applied! None really deserving of it where ever yet discovered by voyagers or by*

*travellers. They have discovered heathens and barbarians, whom by cruelties they have exasperated into savages* (p. 38).

These are examples showing how Melville makes the claim that the savage is in fact to be found in the West. The so-called civilized is in fact the barbarian, with a thirst for blood and a desire for killing and destruction. Melville turns the binary opposite that ideologically justifies Western aggression and exploitation upside down. He shows that intrusions by Western imperialism provoke violence in South Pacific islanders. He then shows that Western civilized man is in fact the savage barbarian, not the South Pacific islander. He goes further in his critique and suggests that native islanders are not only better off without Western intrusion, but that they are simply more civilized and better than Western people. The following examples demonstrate this well.

*May not the savage be the happier man of the two? (For lack of 1000 wants and removed from half harassing cares)* (p. 41).

What has he to desire at the hands of civilization? She may “cultivate his mind,” – may “elevate his thoughts,” – these I believe are the established phrases – but will he be the happier? Let the one smiling and Populist Hawaiian Islands with their now diseased, starving, and dying natives, answer the question (p. 149).

The lack of many evils found in European civilization is because in Typee “to sum up all in one word – no money! That “root of all evil” was not to be found in the valley (p. 151).

*[They] go about their daily life without need of courts of law or police or contracts with lawyers. And despite this lack of law enforcing institutions he says “everything went on in the valley with a harmony and smoothness unparalleled, I will venture to assert, and the most select, Brookline, and pious associations of mortals in Christendom. How are we to explain this enigma? These islanders were heathens! Savages! Cannibals! And how they came today, without the aid of established law, to exhibit ... that social order which is the greatest blessing and highest price of the social state?* (p. 235)

*In the darkest night they slept securely, all their worldly wealth around them, and houses the doors of which were never fast. The disquieting ideas of theft or assassination never disturbed them. Each islander reposed beneath his own palmetto thatching, or set under his own breadfruit tree, with none to molest or alarm him. There was not a padlock in the valley, nor anything that answers the purpose*

*of one: still there was no community of goods* (p. 236).

Speaking of the treatment of women, Melville says, "nowhere are the ladies more assiduously courted; nowhere are they better appreciated as the contributors to our highest enjoyments; I know where they aren't more sensible underpowered. Are different from their condition among the many rude nations, where the women are made to perform all the work ... [while] the gentle sex in the valley of Typee were exempted from toil, if toil it might be called, even in that tropical climate, they never distilled one drop of perspiration (p. 239).

Melville implies that Europeans misunderstand native culture and label it as "savage", while he actually views the natives as being entirely civilized. Melville constantly encourages his readers to be more open-minded by appreciating that Polynesian natives are, in many ways, superior human beings to those who live in civilized cities. The natives treat each other kindly, honestly and with generosity. They are seen as more peaceful and loving than Europeans. In fact, it is the Europeans and the Americans who truly display brutality and savagery as they colonize the native world.

## CONCLUSION

Melville seems strongly to have believed that contact with the European and American world had a negative effect on native cultures. He opens his book by suggesting that it would be better for natives to remain

on "undiscovered" islands. Throughout the text, he illustrates the terrible effects of European contact by discussing the influence of missionaries, colonists and merchantmen. Melville argues repeatedly that native culture is superior to most of what is found in "civilization". Although the so-called "civilized" people condemn natives as "heathens", who engage in barbarism, natives are actually nothing of the kind. The Typees, for example, treat each other with far more civility than people do in urban cities. The Typees generously share their food with one another. They do not lie, cheat or steal. Furthermore, no sections of society are left starving and destitute because of debt or poverty, as is so frequently the case in Europe and the United States. Although the Typees live a less intellectual existence, their lifestyle is one of bliss and relative peacefulness in a kind valley. It seems the natives could teach Europeans many things about how to be less barbaric, Melville feels, but ironically it is the Europeans who call them savages. There is a further irony in the focus on cannibalism as a marker of savagery among the people of the South Pacific and as a reason to subjugate and destroy them. Westerners, in their own predominantly Christian practice of taking communion during mass or during religious services, engage it seems in ritual cannibalism. In front of a Christian congregation, the priest turns bread and wine into the flesh and blood of their God, Jesus Christ. And then, they eat his flesh and drink his blood. Cannibalism is usually wrapped around

ritual, and whether done in darkest Africa, on a remote island in the Pacific or in Rome, it is all the same: consuming the body and spirit of some being or entity or person that the consumer wants to remember and benefit from in some special way. But the Western powers used hegemonic ideology such as claiming the South Pacific islanders were heathen cannibals and therefore deserving of domination, to justify their actions.

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