

Typee: An Insight into the Human Psyche

Mr. Akram A. Shareef

Assistant Professor

Dept of English/ College of Arts

University of Mosul

In this novel, Herman Melville has proved to be an explorer of the realms of darkness within the human psyche rather than some geographical places. It is a sea journey to the valley of Typee which lies in the Pacific Ocean. Here he lived among the cannibals. Melville's Typee is like Defoe's Robinson Crusoe (1719) who takes the adventures of a man in real life as a core of his novel, and that man is Melville himself. He jumped from his ship and joined the people of the valley of Typee, so "Typee is a true narrative of events which actually occurred to him." However, it soon turned out to be a symbol of cultural differences and conflicts which flourished during the nineteenth century. Melville set the sea as if he tried to isolate himself and forget about the life he was leading, finding in the sea an outlet for his troubled psyche and depressed soul. Melville discovered that the world was full of evil concealed beneath a thin veil of innocence. He came across the fact that civilization was the main source of evils. Hence, Melville decided to retreat from "civilization" and go back to the primitive life looking for the lost paradise. Like the hero's quest in the medieval romance for an innocent and unpolluted Garden of Eden, he could not cope with humanity as D.H. Lawrence argues: Melville is like a Viking going home to the sea, encumbered with age and memories, and a sort of accomplished despair, almost madness. For he cannot accept humanity. He cannot belong to humanity. The statement above explains Melville's intention to abandon the corrupted life of civilization. In other words, to go back to the

primitive life in an attempt to find the lost innocence. This assures that Melville could not accept the world as it was. He determined to go to the Pacific Ocean for a new experience. Actually, there is a reason behind Melville's choice of the Pacific Ocean, as Lawrence puts it

“Without doubt the Pacific Ocean is oens older than the Atlantic or Indian Oceans. When we say older, we mean it has not come to any modern consciousness. Strange convulsions have the Atlantic and Mediterranean peoples into phase of consciousness, while the Pacific and the Pacific people have slept.³”

People of the Pacific were freed from the impact of the civilized life and mainly that of the European civilization which was, indeed mixed with corruption. Melville sailed out of New Bedford on board "Acushnet" firstly to be away from others, and secondly to rescue his exhausted imagination by going to the main source of meditation. But the conditions aboard were also intolerable. As a result, Tommo, the narrator and the hero of Typee, who is Melville himself, with his friend Toby jumped out of the ship. They escaped into the mountains of Nukahiva, one of the Marquesas Islands in the South Pacific.

However, it seems that the reason behind Melville's deserting the ship was the desire for experience. He came to see the life of the islands, and if he didn't leave the ship, he would see nothing but the wide sea. This may also denote his growth of mind. Melville found himself ready to unfold the secrets of the world; especially the enigma of evil. This motive was what would give **Typee** and the latter works connected with his South Sea voyages the aspect of revelation of what was behind. He wanted to reveal the reality of evil in a mysterious world far away from any restrictions.

It is not the chance that leads Tommo to quit the ship, so much as he intends that from the very beginning of the novel, because he has been fed up with the brutality of the civilized man. Such an act represents an escape not only from the ship, but also from the futile restlessness of the western civilization. On this Lewis states:

He (Melville) "jumped off" by crossing the Pacific and jumping ship to plunge into the interior of a primitive Island. His action characterized a man whose imagination could expand into the mythic just because it was steadily nourished by the roughness of the actual.⁴

Thus, the entrance into the value of Typee opens the door for Tommo to plunge into a new experience with the symbol of innocence, the primitive man. In other words, Melville's new experience is a voyage into the man's psyche to discover the place where no civilized hypocrisies and bland deceptions lurk.

The Primitive Man as a Symbol of Innocence:

Tommo, the civilized man, describes the natives as the "others" and in terms of European civilization, "the other" always already judged to be inferior. Such a portrayal is inevitable because Melville was influenced by the dominant ideas of his time. Tommo cannot stand even the idea of entering the valley of Typee.

**The very name of Typee struck a panic into my heart
Which I did not attempt to disguise. The thought of
Voluntary throwing ourselves into the hands of these
Cruel savages seemed to me an act of mere madness;
And almost equally so the idea of venturing into the
valley. (pp.934)**

What Tommo imagines for the Typees is wholly changed since he makes his first step in the valley. One can get an intimate picture of the innocence and beauty of the valley and the natives as well throughout Tommo's progress towards the valley. Tommo meets in his entrance a young couple; they "were a boy and a girl, slender and graceful, and completely naked, with the exception of a slight girdle of bark" (pp 112-13) They are so lovely and show their hospitality for the two wanderers. At first glance, it would seem that Tommo and his friend have discovered Paradise in the South Seas. From the time they stumbled upon the lowers of Typee valley, the boy and the girl were naked and oblivious of their nakedness. It seems that Tommo and his friend entered in a society as guileless as the garden of Adam and Eve before they had fallen.⁵ Tommo notices how kind the Typees, and how beautiful they are. Indeed, Tommo is puzzled over the hospitality of the natives who welcome him so generously especially the chief, Mehevi Tommo narrates

On addressing him, he advances at once in the most cordial manner, and greeting Me warmly...I forth with determined to secure, if possible, the good will of his individual (p. 125)

Mehevi is quite friendly and apparently eager to know more about the customs of Tommo's land. He expresses his innocent and good personality when he notices the swelling in Tommo's leg. He examines it with great care and sends to the island of Hippocrates to seek a physician to examine the patient. Mehevi also appoints one of the Typees who is called kory-kory to attend the sick man and to be his trust body. Moreover, Tommo describes the mysterious good order and social cohesiveness of the valley life.

Everything went on ... with a harmony and smoothness unparalleled. I will Venture to assert, in the most select, refined and pious associations of mortals in Christendom. How we to explain this enigma? These islanders were heathens! Savages! Ay, cannibals! and how came they, without the aid of established law, to exhibit, in so eminent a degree, that social order, which is the greatest blessing and highest pride of the social state? (p. 267)

Tommo keeps on his description of the earthly paradise giving himself up to the enjoyment of the many pleasures man could get in Typee. Tommo once awakes to find the house of Marheyo, in which he and Toby reside in, filled with young females, decorated with flowers and sat around them. "Long and minute was the investigation with which they honored us, and so uproarious their mirth, that I felt infinitely sheepish" (p.123). It is worthwhile to mention his love with a beautiful girl name Fayway whom he has spent many happy times with, boating, swimming, and longing around. He learns much more through his careful peep into everyday life of the Marquesan natives which consists of very much play, very little work and a great quantity of sleep. He affirms:

The minds of these simple savages were capable of deriving the utmost delight from circumstances which would have passed unnoticed in more intelligent communities. (p.204)

However, this somehow lengthy description may have been due to the fact that Tommo wants to get an intimate picture of the innocence and beauty of the natives as well as a catalogue of many of their customs, habitual rites, rituals and thoughts. In this way, Melville intends to impress his ideology of idealizing the Typee's life as George Woodcock points out

It reduces the Marquesans, from a relatively sophisticated people, with life based on agriculture and producing massive works of communal labour, to a mere food gathering tribe.⁶

What Woodcock tries to do is to emphasize the innocent nature of these children of nature, for the “penalty of the Fall presses very lightly upon the valley of Typee” (p.265). Tommo, moreover, notices the absence of “the root of all evil”, the money (p.182). People there live in a society which is based on a complete equality among its members. It is the world where one can fulfill his desires. Besides the absence of money, there is the absence of the wild animals, which again is another concrete evidence that assured the innocence of the valley. The longer Tommo stays among the natives, the more keenly he senses the beauty and charm of the island. Aimed the wholly natural, preconventional life of the island Paradise and during Adam and Eve relation with Fayway, Tommo finds a continual happiness. There seems to be no cars, grieves, troubles or vexations in the valley of Typee. One may agree with Lawrence's description of the valley as a Paradise arguing:

There he (Tommo) is then, in Typee among the dreaded cannibal savages.and they are gentle and generous with him, and he is surely in a sort of Eden.⁷

The Civilized Man as a Savage Creature:

Any literary work mirrors the writer's ideology and Melville's **Typee**, not to mention, offers his distinctive ideology which can be summarized in his radical critique of civilization.

Indeed, Tommo strongly criticizes the European civilization symbolized by the European missionaries in the Marquesan islands. These missionaries are ignorant and they have failed to understand the Polynesian mind and culture. Tommo's visit to the valley is linked with the growing

religious and political power of the missionaries, who, everywhere, prepare the way for the takeover of the Polynesian island by western powers in search of empires. The idea of America as Empire has gained wide and acceptable currency by the mid nineteenth century; Jefferson himself praised America as an "empire of liberty".⁸ America in this way freed its hand legally into an aggressive phase of imperialism, and the exposition of this fact in the meantime is the target of Melville's novel.

Tommo's presence in the valley expresses, ironically, the white man's right to control other people. It is symptomatic of the cultural privilege he possesses as a white man. The white man, Tommo, gives himself the right to choose a new orthography for both Typee (Taipii) and Happar (Hapa). Actually, there is no record that states (Taipii) as a "lover of human flesh", rather, the word most likely meant enemy". It is as noticed by Charles Anderson that "Typee" is not a proper noun but it means a "terrible foe" or "people enemy". It occasionally mirrors the ultimate reconfiguration of racial construction.

In the first page of **Typee** the reader may notice the frequent use of colours in the narrative which leads him towards consideration of race, colour and ethnicity. Skin colour in the mid of the nineteenth century was the most obvious way of dividing individuals into racial groups. The darkness of the skin colour was connected to the degree of "blackness", therefore, a negative character he was to be regarded. This strategy is adopted by Melville throughout the mask of Tommo, in his narration to deal with some of the moral issue of slavery by his treatment of people according to their colour.¹⁰ Tommo, who is a symbol of the white man constructs the non white as mentally inferior to Europeans.

Tommo's description of the native as the "children of nature... for the penalty of the Fall presses very lightly upon the valley of Typee" (p. 265) can be interpreted as an intended comparison with lazy animals which crouch under the trees and wait for the fruit to fall. It is in one way or another an assertion of the natives' inferiority. Yet Melville slyly presents his ideas to the readers in order to be on the safe side and away from any criticism directed towards him. When he describes Fayway, for instance, he concentrates on her complexion as "a rich and mantling olive... I could almost swear that beneath (her cheeks) lurked the blushes of a faint vermilion" (p.133). Tommo in this example seeks to confirm the separation of "white" self from the darkness of the islanders. Though, he sometimes, and in a directed description, refers to the inhabitants as "dark figures". Additionally, he senses evil through the darkness of the valley itself.

And, the darkness, affected my spirits to a degree which nothing had ever before produced and abandoned myself to frightful anticipations of evil (p.109).

Systematically, Melville tries to direct his attack towards the shameful behaviour of the white man in the South Seas. He achieves this by making an implicit comparison between the savage and the civilized man along narration. He wants to arrive at the final conclusion that the white man is the ugliest beast on earth. He starts his novel by criticizing the protestant missionaries in the South Seas trying to permit the reader to locate evil in its proper place. The missionaries keep in advance, the polluted image for the Marquesian, Tommo says:

**Next week we shape our course to the marquesas! the marquesas!
"The marquesas! What strange vision of outlandish things does
the very name spirit up! ... cannibal banquets... savage wood
lands guarded by horrible idols heathenish rite and human
sacrifices. (p.37)**

One can conceive that these lines stress the cruelty of the white man and how he makes use of the simple-minded "children of nature". Melville refers to them clearly when Tommo declares that the missionaries and the sailors are "polluting examples!" (p. 50). They are just like Satan who introduced sin and evil into the Garden of Eden:

**Alas for the poor savages when exposed to the influence of these
polluting examples! Unsophisticated and confiding, they are
easily led every vice, and humanity weeps over the ruin thus
remorselessly inflicted upon them by their European civilization
(p. 50).**

Hence, T. Walter Herbert discusses that the novel works to construct that kind of comparison between the missionaries and the natives, affirming:

**It is not so much contradictory in its information as it is about
contradictions between available interpretative paradigms:
Schematically, these of the missionaries and those of a less
homogenous group of secular commentators we may group
under the banner of Enlightenment.¹¹**

In his task to convert the savages from atheism into Christianity, one of his missionaries savagely makes use of the simple-minded natives. He introduces his young and beautiful wife to them. She is a white woman, beside she is completely dressed into white, and because the natives glorify the white colour, they prone to worship her. In this respect, the narrator declares:

She is the first white woman who had ever visited their shores. The islanders at first gazed in mute admiration at so unusual a prodigy, and seemed inclined regard it as some new divinity (p.39).

Nevertheless, when the natives discover that there is a woman underneath the "sacred veil of calico" (p. 39), the idolatry changes to contempt, stripped of her clothes, her honour, and her fervour. Consequently, the natives become so angry that the missionary and his wife have to throw up their mission and depart. This anecdote contains the major ingredients of Melville's most serious criticism in **Typee**, the evil practices in the name of virtue by the Christian missionaries as James E. Miller observes.¹²

He is so certain of his foxy intentions that frequently blind him to his own cruelty. The missionaries wear masks to delude others, for the reader can easily observe the gap between their voiced aims and their real achievement. Indeed, the masks, not to mention, are only designed to delude the natives, for the main task of the double-faced civilization is to design masks. Hence, the white man is the villain in **Typee**, and behind this villainy in all its complexity, civilization lies. The Typees, on the other hand, ring a bell in the reader's mind of the Indian tribes that became easy victims before the barbarism of the white man in his struggle to possess their land. And the existence of the missionaries who symbolize the American imperialism in the South Seas provides a metaphor for its continuing expansionism on the frontier. It means the intervention in the South Seas, and the destruction of the Polynesian life.

Tommo narrates:

Among the islands of Polynesia, no sooner are the images overturned, the temples demolished, and the idolaters converted into nominal Christians, the disease, vice, and premature death make their appearance. The depopulated land is then recruited from the rapacious hordes of enlightened individuals who settle themselves within its borders, and clamorously announce the progress of the truth. Neat villas, trim gardens, shaven lawns, spires and cupolas arise ,while the poor savages soon finds himself an interloper in the country of his fathers. (p.266).

Moreover, as a natural result under the shed of occupation, man loses his human rites and that is what really happens in the South Seas. Furthermore, the French Captain works hard to embroil the natives in the mud of a civil war for the sake of his survival. He, in turn, obliges them to bring him regular supplies of pigs and fruit for the military superiority demonstrates a level of civilization that gives the white man the right to impose his purposes on weaker ones. Herbert in his essay, "Melville's **Typee** and American Empire" (2003), assures that Melville has created a microcosm of the European and the American Empires which are based on others' blood.¹³ These incidents show the reality of the European occupation and their claim to a civilized and humane culture. Thus, the occupation is a "single infraction of the rights of humanity" (p.52). As a result, the occupation does widen the implications of **Typee's** critique of the European civilization.

Melville broods on the ideology which he opts to criticize the American and the European civilization as well. He again recounts the "exploits of sailors and marines from the frigate "Essex" who try to annihilate the Typees. But the Typees resist them "although with much loss" obliging them to "retreat and abandon their design of conquest" (p.62). The

invaders find no other solution but to remove the mask of civilization and reveal their brutality:

The invaders, on their march back to the sea, consoled themselves for their repulse by setting fire to every house and temple in their rout; and a long line of smoking ruins defaced the once smiling bosom of the valley, and proclaimed to its pagan inhabitants the spirit that reigned in the breasts of Christian soldiers. (p.623)

Melville mends his pace to tell the reader that brutality is the true nature of the white man, and it is easy to notice this nature when the white man leaves his motherland. Tommo says that although this nature is seldom revealed at home, "the enormities perpetrated in the South Seas upon some of the inoffensive islanders will nigh pass belief" (p.63) The narrator himself does not believe his eyes and so he has to "transgress civilized" laws. Hence, he has to jump the ship and escape into the valley of Nukahiva island to be free from the evil civilization. During his residence in the valley of Typee, Tommo discovers the superiority of the natives over the civilized world. For his captivity is not a normal one, he is held as a gentle imprisonment by the Typees who reinforced their good morality, despite their cannibalistic nature. This leads Franklin to say, "Typee is a discovery about the fundamental enigmas of all mythology and theology."¹⁴

Evil expresses itself in Tommo's heart and mind at the end of the novel. Tommo, who has been a welcomed visitor in the valley, reveals the evil nature of the white man. The urgings of the tattoo artist to decorate him with his handiwork has left Tommo apprehensive and more than ever determined to escape. He cannot submit to tattooing, because he regards it as the permanent visible impress of the other on his whiteness. He does not understand the Typees' behaviour of preventing him from leaving the valley, "The natives, for some reason or other, would interpose every possible

obstacle to my leaving them" (p. 172-3). Yet, when the opportunity becomes manageable, he bids a bloody farewell to the valley. The Chief Mow-Mow, who tries to catch Tommo's boat to prevent him from escaping, is killed on the hands of Tommo. He dashes the boat hook at Mow-Mow who "was hit just below the throat" (p.332). Tommo's discovery of cannibalism forces him not only to use violence, but to do so in order to act like a man, in order to portray himself as the heroic survivor of the adventure story and the travel narrative.¹⁵ The white man is to be attacked again for he gives himself the right to criticize other people. Tommo makes it clear as he denies the Typee's humanity. He presents them to the readers as people who live without history.

Nothing can be more uniform and undiversified than the life of the Typee; one tranquil day of ease and happiness follows another in quick succession, and with these unsophisticated savages the history of a day is the history of a life. (p.210)

Tommo's description of the Typees as "unhistorical" people precipitates not only in the negation of Typee's history but also in the negation of the validity of Typee's society as humane. It is for this reason Melville referred to the Typees on so many occasions in the novel as lazy animals. It is worth mentioning that Tommo's presence in the valley symbolizes the European-American power. And when the natives wear his shirts on special festive days, it gives the reader significant remarks of the powers over the natives. In other words, the natives have become captives of the civilized man indirectly and expressed their surrender to the tyrant power of the corrupted civilization. As a result, the term "savage" which is used by the white man to describe the primitive people, as Tommo does in the novel, should attribute to no one but the civilized man himself. The natives can

narrowly be called as savage for the civilized man is more savage than these people. Tommo states:

Civilization for every advantage she imparts holds a hundred evils in reverse: the heart burnings, the jealousies, the social rivalries, the family dissensions, and the thousand self inflicted discomforts of refined life, which makes up in units the swelling aggregate of human misery, are unknown among these unsophisticated people... But it is needless to multiply the examples of civilized barbarity...the term "savage" is, I conceive, often Misapplied. (pp.180-1).

To this extent, the civilized man must shoulder the whole responsibility and the censure of polluting the natives. It is really the project of Melville in **Typee**, who insists that no race should dominate others with superior technology, religion or military powers under the mask of civilization. In other words, civilization is regarded as one side of the coins of evil.

It is strange to see a wise man escape from Paradise unless there is a defect in Tommo's escape, however, may symbolize the ultimate recognition of the horror that exists not far beneath the placid surface. In his deadly need for the earthly Paradise, Tommo's leg has been swollen painfully and mysteriously before reaching the blessing valley as if he, "had been bitten by some venomous reptile" (p.90). It actually symbolizes Tommo's failure in gaining the earthly Paradise.

The Paradise Tommo found is just like the biblical Eden which is not a complete one because of the existence of the serpent. If a reader scrutinizes carefully the South Seas Garden, he will surely discover vital differences from the arch type one. On the other hand, it reveals Tommo's expectation which goes far beyond reality. One shall start from the scene of Tommo and Toby's arrival in Typee valley. Both guests see in the distance trees which

bore a delicious fruit. Yet, they discover that the fruit is rotten. "They were two or three of the fruit, but to our chagrin they proved to be much decayed; the rinds partly opened by the birds, and their hearts half devoured" (p.111). The decayed fruit gives glimpses that this valley is not the golden land where the American individual in the nineteenth century could fulfill his dreams. It reinforces the failure of the American dream in the mind of every ambitious American individual by which he deluded himself.

As soon as the two chaps learn to their dismay that they are among cannibals, they recognize that they were in a big trouble. They may become sooner or later a delicious meal for the cannibals. Tommo mentions "the plot is now thicken." (p.112). In advance, Tommo has fearful images of the Typee and its inhabitants, "nothing but dark and fearful chasms" (p.95). Tommo is unable to make heads or tails of the Typees' strange behavior and their cannibalistic nature.

Notes

1. As quoted by Watson G. Branch ,Melville the Critical Heritage (London: Rutledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 5. Three novels: Moby Dick ,Billy Budd, and Evil in Herman Melville's Typee, 2004
2. D.H Lawrence ,Studies in Classic American Literature (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1984), p.124
3. Lawrence, p.125.
4. As quoted by R.W.B. Lewis The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), p.132.
5. James E. Miller, Reader Guide to Herman Melville, (Chicago: Chicago University Press 1977), p.28.
6. As quoted by Douglas Luison, "I Saw Everything but Could Comprehend Nothing. Melville's Typee, Travel Narrative, and Colonial Discourse", ATQ, 16, 2 (June, 2002), p.124.

7. Lawrence, pp.127-28.
8. As quoted by Nalini Johar Schueller "Colonialism and Melville's South Seas Journeys ,"Studies in American Literature 22,(spring, 1994), p.4.
9. Charles R. Anderson Melville in the South Sea (New York: Dover Publications 1986) P.79.
10. Schueller, p.11.
11. As quoted by Alek Calder "The Thrice Mysterious Taboo Melville's Typee and the Perception of Culture", Representations, 67 (Summer 1999), p.28.
12. Miller, pp.24-25.
13. Herbert "Melville's Typee and American Empire" (June, 2003 Unpublished Essay used here by the author's permission), pp.2-4
14. As quoted by Schueller, p.7.
15. T. Ivison, p. 127.

