

Compassionate colonialism



Herman Melville's *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* is both a compelling illusory story and a concerted effort to moderate the imperialist mindset of its readers. In fact, *Typee* is a narrative that doubles as a manifesto, a collection of Melville's own autobiographical observations that are meant to educe attitudes against colonialism. "Colonialism," however, is a broad topic, and Melville could have constructed an argument against its rudiments in many different ways. In *Typee*, Melville manages to write a novel against colonialism without writing a novel about colonialism, never stepping aside from his responsibilities as a storyteller. Certainly, there are moments in the text where anti-imperialist arguments—though never identified as such—are dealt with directly by the narrator. Most of the narrative, however, employs anti-imperial rhetoric on much subtler levels, involving the intersection of numerous themes and ideas. Perhaps because of these complications, *Typee* is also a problematic text, as Melville often employs ideas at odds with his anti-colonialism intent. In fact, I argue that Melville ultimately fails in his attempts to edify his readers, as the critiques in *Typee* end up serving the same assumptions they intend to challenge. Much of Melville's anti-imperial rhetoric presents itself in the form of critiques of European-American civilization. In the chapter titled "Civilized and Savage Life Contrasted," Tommo says: In a primitive state of society, the enjoyments of life, though few and simple, are spread over a great extent, and are unalloyed; but Civilization, for every advantage she imparts, holds a hundred evils in reserve;—the heart burnings, the jealousies, the social rivalries, the family dissensions, and the thousand self-inflicted discomforts of refined life, which make up in units the swelling aggregate of human misery, are unknown among these unsophisticated people. (124-5) Tommo, essentially, believes

the Typee culture to be valuable because it is, to his eye, without the irritations of “ refined life.” The Typees’ primitivism is a blessing; the enjoyments and otherwise positive aspects of Typee life are owed to not having to deal with the inconveniences of civilization, to freedom from the self-inflicted pains of modern-era civility. “ To many of them,” Tommo says, “ life is little else than an often interrupted and luxurious nap” (152). The central problem with these arguments, however, is that they are not arguments for native peoples but, rather, are arguments against European-American society. Melville professes the value of Typee culture because of what it is not—it is not a culture of capitalism, nor is it a European culture. This is why the “ exotic” locales of the world are fanciful and exotic to the American or European heart in the first place; it is the civilized person’s ironic dream to live a converse life. The Typee people do not work (in the capitalist sense), nor are they concerned with “ mortgages” or “ unreasonable tailors and shoemakers” (126). But this valuation of a native culture for what it lacks is a vain endeavor and only serves to reinforce the notions of European superiority. In fact, Tommo’s words are symptomatic of imperialist thought, which favors a sort of smug self-deprecation that tries to negate (or veil) one’s belief in their superiority—granting advanced technologies and conveniences by mentioning the rough aspects of those things; the Typee may not enjoy the comforts of down mattresses, but oh, aren’t they lucky they don’t have to worry with making a bed! Melville’s attempt at demonstrating the value of a culture because it lacks the inconveniences of a life full of capitalistically prudent comforts is, as a means to defend a people from colonization, useless and superficial. In fact, imperialist forces often justify their actions with such a notion; would it not

be judicious for us to bring modern comforts to a people who are unaware of their suffering? Melville also attempts to subvert his readers' ethnocentric preconceptions about the inferiority of native peoples. While residing in a Typee dwelling, Tommo says: Marheyo was a most paternal and warm-hearted fellow, and in this particular not a little resembled his son Kory-Kory. The mother of the latter was the mistress of the family, and a notable housewife, and a most industrious old lady she was. If she did not understand the art of making jellies, jams, custards, tea-cakes, and such like trashy affairs, she was profoundly skilled in the mysteries of preparing "amar," "poe-poe," and "kokoo," [...] bustling about the house like a country landlady. (84) Tommo witnesses paternalism in the Typee people; The father is of a warm disposition, and the "mother" of the family tends to domestic operations much in the same way, ostensibly, that an American head of house might. She is even skilled in the Typee-equivalent of cooking home-foods. Melville attempts to invoke the shared humanity between the Typees and his readers, painting a picture of family and domesticity familiar to his audience. In essence, he tries to humanize the Typee, alleviating his civilized readers the alien aspects of the Typees' existence. Unfortunately, Melville's efforts to demonstrate the depth of Typee humanity continually prove conflicted by colonial imperatives that demand exhibition of the native's inferiority. Tommo's narration of his experiences on the island possesses an authority of observation inexorably granted him by his outsider status. Assessments and analysis of an alien culture implies simplicity, and Tommo's observations are in step with colonial requisites that necessitate singular, one-dimensional native peoples. For example, Tommo is repeatedly in the habit of denying the Typee people a history. He says, "Nothing can be

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more uniform and undiversified than the life of the Typees; [...] and with these unsophisticated savages the history of a day is the history of a life" (149). This is a direct denial of the validity of the Typees as a society, representing their day-to-day existence as trivial despite revelations that there are often days of feasting, as well as times of war and mourning. Even when Melville attempts to relate the beauty of the Typee native, he does so with an ethnocentric eye and employs imperialist language. The islanders are handsome because of the "European cast of their features," and their faces present a profile that is "classically beautiful" (184). This, of course, is symptomatic of the quintessential Euro-centric view of the world (the view that labels North America "West" and Asia "East" in the first place), one where even physical features are subject to European tastes and critique, and Melville's attempt at justifying his admiration for the Typees only serves to reinforce European norms. So, too, does Melville undermine his message by making use of certain symbols of his civilization's supposed superiority. Consider the description of the warrior Marheyo placing Tommo's rotted shoes around his neck: I immediately comprehended his desires, and very generously gave him the shoes, which had become quite mouldy, wondering for what earthly purpose he could want them. The same afternoon I descried the venerable warrior approaching the house, with a slow, stately gait, earrings in ears, and spear in hand, with this highly ornamental pair of shoes suspended from his neck by a strip of bark, and swinging backwards and forwards on his capacious chest. (146) In this passage the narrator takes a decidedly arrogant tone, as he emphasizes the warrior's delight in such a mundane artifact. Marheyo's status as a respected warrior, evident from the pointed phrases "venerable" and "stately," is mocked, and he is portrayed

as a fool, strutting around, proud of his new ornamentations. The humor of the situation belongs entirely to the reader, though, with the savage man as the butt of a joke he would find perplexing. Most importantly, this scene points to the continual portrayal of the Typee natives as having a childlike demeanor. But Melville portrays the Typee as childlike not because they maintain a level of civility free from the aforementioned jealousies and evils of civilization (as children are often portrayed in literature and popular culture as being free of the prejudices adults often harbor), but because they do not know better. They are childlike in that they are without the essential enlightenment of civilization that informs one to dispose of moldy shoes or else be embarrassed if caught wearing them. Melville's self-serving portrayal of the Typee only reinforces the imperial assumption of the naïve native, that they are lacking some part of Melville's own civilization essential before one might be considered a person at all. It is, ultimately, a reinforcement of the paternalistic mindset that, for a colonial presence, might rationalize the administration of native peoples. Perhaps the most damning issue with Typee is that of Melville's preoccupation with cannibalism. Tommo begins mentioning his fears that the natives might be cannibals at first sight of the islands, and his perception of their status as cannibals evolves through the course of the narrative. He eventually discovers, concealed in Marheyo's house, severed human heads and limbs, including the head of a white man, and takes this as final proof of their cannibalism: Despite the efforts of Marheyo and Kory-Kory to restrain me, I forced my way into the midst of the circle, and just caught a glimpse of three human heads [...] It was plain that I had seen the last relic of some unfortunate wretch, who must have been massacred on the beach by the savages, [...] Was I destined to perish like

him-like him, perhaps, to be devoured, and my head to be preserved as a fearful memento of the event? (232-3) Tommo immediately assumes that the heads are “mementos” of cannibalism, the leftovers of a meal that began with the savage massacre of an unknowing victim, and he fears that cannibalism is his fate, too. In a matter of a few sentences, Melville very nearly undoes any benefit previously assigned to the Typee. They are no longer a remote culture deserving of admiration. Instead, the discovery of cannibalism is the evidence of a primitive and savage people Tommo had most expected to find in the Marquesas Islands. The goodwill extended to him by the Typee now counts for nothing; it is mere pacification before his denouement. Cannibalism is meant to be the definitive signifier of savagery, representing a total refutation of civilization and order. By discovering what he believes to be proof of cannibalism, Tommo more or less discovers the validity of his ethnocentric, colonial notions he had refused to surrender all along. Why, then, would Melville employ such a problematic element as cannibalism in a manner that undermines much of his narrative? In mentioning cannibalism, the narrator asks whether “the mere eating of human flesh so very far exceeds in barbarity” the practice of public executions in England (125). In other words, the savagery of cannibalism is offered as being roughly equal to the savagery and wretchedness in “civilized” society. This constitutes a rare direct argument against ethnocentrism, and its employ, it turns out, is made possible by the inevitable discourse implicated by Melville’s inclusion of cannibalism. But Melville does not seem to include cannibalism to enable a discussion of the equal savageries of civilized and savage peoples (a fruitful discussion though that may be). Rather, he invokes cannibalism in the least meaningful way: as <https://assignbuster.com/compassionate-colonialism/>

a simple and undemanding means to his story's end, the thing that sets off Tommo's escape from the now-revealed Typee savages. This, then, is why cannibalism so severely undermines Melville's narrative. It is the ultimate betrayal of his intentions, serving as a final satisfaction of readers' expectations of the native's inferiority. I regard Melville's attempts to moderate colonialist assumptions to be sincere. I also recognize the fact that Typee is, first and foremost, a story. But authors must be held accountable for their works and judged appropriately when they attempt to extol the virtues of their own beliefs onto their readership. Typee fails in its expression of anti-colonialism rhetoric because Melville refuses to deny his readership their expectations, capitulating to and relying on their preconceptions. Certainly, it might be argued that Typee best serves as a transitional text, introducing new notions of civility and savagery without the blatant denial of popular opinion. But when it comes to valuing human life, there can be no protracted and undemanding transition, no gray area in which one might still weigh the value of one sovereign culture over another. There can be no such thing as a compassionate colonialist, one who professes admiration of a foreign people while believing in the inevitability of their conversion. Works Cited Melville, Herman. Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life. Ed. John Bryant. New York: Penguin Books, 1996.